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A STUDY OF "MYSTERY" IN THE NEW TESTAMENT

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The word "mystery" as it occurs in ancient Greek and Semitic sources, as well as in the NT, refers to a secret which is only revealed to certain individuals. In the NT it is God who reveals the mystery and faithful believers who perceive it. Carnal believers and unbelievers are not able to understand the mystery. The mystery centers around the Lordship of Christ who is the Life of the church. Although the mystery is opposed by Satan, it will be fully known to all in the end.

* * *

INTRODUCTION

THE word "mystery" (μυστήριον) occurs twenty-eight times¹ in the NT. Although there are passing references to it in commentaries, technical studies on the background of the word in the Greek mystery religions and in the Semitic world, and a few Roman Catholic works which discuss the word, "there is no comprehensive monograph on μυστήριον."² The present study will not fill this gap, but hopefully it will stir interest and provoke further study.

THE MEANING OF THE WORD

The word μυστήριον can be translated "secret, secret rite, secret teaching, mystery." According to Bauer, it is used in the NT "to mean the secret thoughts, plans, and dispensations of God which are hidden from the human reason, as well as from all other comprehension below the divine level, and hence must be revealed to those for whom they are intended."³ However, to understand properly what this word meant in the early church it is necessary to explore its background.

¹The word occurs twenty-eight times if read in 1 Cor 2:1 with the support of p^{46vid} x* A C etc. However the reading μαρτυριον has broader support in x² B D F G Ψ, the Majority text, etc.

²G. Bornkamm, "μυστήριον," *TDNT* 4 (1967) 802.

³BAGD, 530.

First, there has been much written about the similarities between the Greek mystery religions and the NT use of "mystery."⁴ The mystery religions had their roots in the Babylonian story of Ishtar and Tammuz.⁵ They spread throughout the Roman empire and played a significant role in the Greek world from the seventh century B.C. to the fourth century A.D.⁶ Though there were many differences among the various mystery cults, four similarities existed: 1) cultic rites were performed by a circle of devotees to portray and to share in the destinies of a god, 2) only the initiated were allowed knowledge of these sacred rites, 3) the devotees were promised salvation by the dispensing of cosmic life, and 4) a vow of silence was placed on all devotees prohibiting the sharing of any information or sacred rites with the non-initiated.⁷ Since Paul grew up in Tarsus and was exposed to the culture of his day, he probably knew about these mystery religions.⁸ However, because of his Jewish training under Gamaliel in Jerusalem (Acts 22:3) and because of his conversion and subsequent revelations from Christ himself (Gal 1:12), he would not have adapted the concepts of the mystery religions to his new Christian faith. The vast differences between these two systems preclude this possibility.⁹

A second major use of this word was in everyday conversation. It was used to speak of a "private secret not to be indulged even to a friend, family secrets," medical mysteries, and of other things "that no one can understand."¹⁰ In the philosophy of Plato and his followers, "the mysteries are not cultic actions but obscure and secret doctrines whose hidden wisdom may be understood only by those capable of knowledge."¹¹ The purpose of such philosophy was not to conceal the secrets as did the cults, but to guide people to understand them in their "symbolical appearance or concealment."¹²

However, to appreciate Paul's understanding of "mystery," the word must be seen as it was used in Jewish contexts.¹³ Μυστήριον is

⁴For studies on these similarities, see Bornkamm, "μυστήριον," 4. 803-8; Richard Reitzenstein, *Hellenistic Mystery Religions: Their Basic Ideas and Significance* (Pittsburg: Pickwick, 1978); and Henry C. Sheldon, *The Mystery Religions and the New Testament* (New York: Abingdon, 1918).

⁵Sheldon, *Mystery Religions*, 21.

⁶Bornkamm, "μυστήριον," 4. 803.

⁷*Ibid.*, 803-8.

⁸Reitzenstein, *Hellenistic Mystery Religion*, 88.

⁹See Sheldon, *Mystery Religions*, 64-70, 155, for a discussion of differences and his conclusion that there was no adapting from the one to the other.

¹⁰Bornkamm, "μυστήριον," 810-11.

¹¹*Ibid.*, 808.

¹²*Ibid.*, 809.

¹³For studies on this, see *ibid.*, 4. 813-17; Raymond E. Brown, *The Semitic Background of the New Testament* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1968); and Joseph A. Robinson, *St. Paul's Epistle to the Ephesians* (London: MacMillan & Co., 1904) 234-40.

not used by the LXX to translate any Hebrew word in the canonical books of the OT.¹⁴ However, it is used eight times in Daniel (2:18, 19, 27, 28, 29, 30, 47, 47) to translate the Aramaic word כְּסֵפֶת / 'secret'¹⁵ in reference to Nebuchadnezzar's dream and Daniel's interpretation of it.¹⁶ It is God "who reveals mysteries, and has made known . . . what will take place in the latter days" (Dan 2:28).¹⁷ The Hebrew word, סוּד / 'council, counsel, secret counsel'¹⁸ (used twenty-two times in the OT) gives an important background to the biblical concept of mystery. The word is used in the OT of a heavenly council composed of an assembly of angels presided over by Yahweh (e.g., Gen 1:26; Job 1:6-12; Ps 82:1) or to the "secrets or mysteries" that were decided at these heavenly councils. Prophets were allowed to "see" these heavenly assemblies and the decisions rendered there (see, e.g., 1 Kgs 22:19-22; Job 15:8; Isa 6:1-13; Jer 23:18, 22; Amos 3:7; Zech 3:1).¹⁹ Thus, the OT refers to a concept of "mystery" as divine secrets that can be known and understood only if God reveals them to his people through a prophet.

Furthermore, Jewish apocalyptic writings in the intertestamental period made extensive use of this concept of "mystery" both for secular uses and also for divine mysteries as "hidden realities which are prepared (Eth. En. 9:6) and kept in heaven, and disclosed and shown to the enraptured seer as he wanders through the heavenly spheres under the guidance of an angel."²⁰ It is also significant that in the Qumran literature of the first century B.C. the idea of "mysteries" plays an important role both in the mysteries of divine providence and also in the particular interpretation of the law developed by the community.²¹ After his study of Jewish literature prior to the NT, Raymond Brown concluded that there are "from the Semitic world good parallels in thought and word for virtually every facet of the NT use of mystery. . . . Paul and the NT writers could have written everything they did about *mysterion* whether or not they ever encountered the pagan mystery religions."²²

The concepts of "mystery" as used in these sources are more or less similar to the NT use of *μυστήριον* to speak of divine secrets that are known only to God and to those to whom he chooses to reveal them. Apart from God's revelation, it would be impossible for human

¹⁴Robinson, *Ephesians*, 234.

¹⁵BDB, 1112.

¹⁶Robinson, *Ephesians*, 234.

¹⁷NASB. Later translations are the author's.

¹⁸BDB, 691.

¹⁹Brown, *Semitic Background*, 2-6.

²⁰Bornkamm, "μυστήριον," 4, 815.

²¹Brown, *Semitic Background*, 22-28.

²²Brown, *Semitic Background*, 69.

beings to comprehend any of God's mysteries. With this preliminary understanding of the word, it is now possible to explore the NT use of the word.

THE MYSTERY RESERVED

When Christ first alluded to the mystery in his kingdom parables (Matt 13:11), he said he was proclaiming "things hidden since the foundation of the world" (Matt 13:35). Paul said that the mystery had been "kept secret from long ages past" (Rom 16:25; cf. 1 Cor 2:7; Eph 3:5, 9; Col 1:26). The mystery may have been obliquely alluded to in the OT, but there were no clear statements or prophecies regarding it. It could not be known naturally and was kept secret since the foundation of the world until finally revealed by God in NT times.

THE MYSTERY REVEALED

The primary revelation of the mystery came through the apostles and prophets. However, it was Jesus who first spoke of the mystery in a series of parables recorded in Matthew 13, Mark 4, and Luke 8. Jesus intentionally presented the mystery in parabolic form so that only the disciples (and possibly other true believers) would understand (Matt 13:10-11, 13, 34-35).

But it was through Paul and the other early apostles and prophets that God fully revealed the mystery. Paul wrote to the Romans of a mystery that "had now been made manifest" (Rom 16:26). In Ephesians Paul referred to the fact that "the mystery has been made known to me by revelation" (3:3) and that it "now has been revealed to His holy apostles and prophets by the Spirit" (3:5). In Col 1:26 Paul declared that this hidden mystery "has now been revealed to His saints." In one sense Paul felt a unique burden as the servant entrusted to proclaim the mystery (1 Cor 4:1; Eph 3:2-9; 6:19-20; Col 4:3-4), but yet he also realized that the mystery had also been revealed to other apostles and prophets. In fact, in 1 Cor 2:6-16 Paul included the Corinthian believers with himself as those who had received the Spirit of God so that they all might know the mysterious things freely revealed by God²³ (cf. Eph 3:5).

²³It is debatable whether Paul is including the Corinthian believers with himself in this passage. Some suggest Paul is referring only to himself and other apostles and prophets. However, I believe that Paul is referring to all believers, not just a select group, because of the way Paul uses the first person singular to speak of himself (1:10, 11, 12, 14, 15, 16, 17; 2:1, 2, 3, 4, 5), second person plural to refer to the Corinthians (1:3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 10, 11, 12, 14, 26, 30; 2:1, 2, 3, 5), and first person plural to include both the Corinthians and himself (1:2, 3, 9, 10, 18, 23, 30; 2:6, 7, 9, 10, 12, 13, 16). Paul in chap. 3 then returns again to first person singular and second person plural to

There are several important conclusions to draw from these passages. First, by the time that Paul was writing, the mystery had already been revealed. Second, God has uniquely revealed his mystery to his apostles and prophets and through them to his saints. The world cannot understand the mystery because it can only be discerned with the help of the Spirit (1 Cor 2:14). A third conclusion is that although some may possess a special role of revealing the truths of the mystery, knowledge of those truths is equally available to *all* who possess God's Holy Spirit—knowledge of the mystery is not the exclusive property of the clergy.

THE MYSTERY RECEIVED

Even though the mystery has been revealed to the NT church through the apostles and prophets, it nevertheless remains somewhat *mysterious*. This is because some "hear and understand" while others do not.

In Matt 13:10–17 Jesus chose to introduce the previously hidden mystery of the kingdom (13:11, 35) in a manner which bewildered even his disciples (13:10). He said that he was speaking in parables so that the multitudes could not understand what he was teaching his disciples. Therefore, in the first NT revelation of the mystery, Jesus taught that it was mysterious not only because it was never revealed before but also because it could be understood only by those to whom the Father revealed it.

Paul also spoke of this principle in Rom 11:25 when he discussed the mystery of Israel. In Romans 9–11 Paul described various aspects of the mystery including the partial hardening of Israel, the grafting in of the Gentiles, and the ultimate salvation of Israel when the fullness of the Gentiles has come in (11:25). However, Paul presented this mystery with a warning—"in order that you may not be wise in your own estimation." If God would cut off his own chosen people because they hardened their heart, how much more would he cut off a Gentile who would follow that same pattern (Rom 11:18–22)? The essential issue which divided those who stood and those who fell was faith in Jesus Christ. Those who try to achieve righteousness through the works of law will fall. But those who live by faith will discover true righteousness and will never be ashamed nor disappointed (Rom 9:30–10:4). The mystery divides both Jews and Gentiles into two groups—those who receive Christ by faith and those who do not receive him.

distinguish himself from the Corinthians (3:1, 2, 3, 4, 6, 10) then first plural to include himself with them (3:9–10).

Paul drew this distinction even further in 1 Cor 2:7 where he discussed the wisdom of God that is contained in the "mystery which has been hidden, which God predestined before the ages to our glory." In this context he distinguished between the believer who has received this mystery/wisdom (2:9-13, 15-16) and the natural man or unbeliever who cannot receive or know it (2:14). But he also distinguished between the mature believer (2:6) and the carnal believer (3:1-4). Every believer has received the mystery because he has received the Holy Spirit. However, all believers do not respond to the mystery with complete devotion. Paul said in 2:6-7 that "we speak wisdom among the *mature*." The word "mature" (τελειος) is used consistently in the NT of those who are spiritually grown up, no longer spiritual infants tossed back and forth all the time.²⁴ Among them Paul could go beyond the basic gospel of "Jesus Christ and Him crucified" (1 Cor 2:2) and beyond the "beginning of the doctrine of Christ" (Heb 6:1). He could lead them by the help of the Spirit to develop the very mind of Christ (2:16). In contrast, Paul had to keep feeding the carnal believers at Corinth the "milk" of the Word (not the "meat") because they were spiritual babies (1 Cor 3:1-4). So in this passage Paul delineates three groups in relation to the mystery: 1) the natural man who *does not* and *cannot* receive nor understand the mystery of God, 2) the carnal believer who *can* understand the mystery but *will not* because he still desires to live by the flesh in the ways of men, and 3) the mature believer who *can* and *does* understand the mystery wisdom of God, being instructed by the Holy Spirit.

It may be concluded from these passages that certain aspects of NT revelation remain mysterious to all but those who receive them by faith and humbly apply them in their lives. Therefore, in understanding "mystery" in the NT it is necessary to note not only the element of something hidden in the mind of God and thus unknowable until God reveals it but also the element that it remains hidden to those who refuse to yield themselves in faith to Jesus Christ. This is a very sobering reality. There was a whole generation of Jews in the day of Christ who knew the Scriptures, but their hearts were so hard that they completely missed the mystery and crucified the Messiah. God cut them off in spite of their desire to be obedient to the law. Even so today there are millions on their way to hell in spite of their good works and their obedience to their church. Though they have read the Bible and heard countless messages, they have missed the NT mystery of salvation through faith in Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior. Equally sobering is the realization that even believers who possess the full potential of knowing the mystery of God sometimes live devoid

²⁴E.g., Matt 5:48; Eph 4:13; Phil 3:15; Col 1:28; 4:12; Heb 5:14; Jas 1:4; 3:2.

of its glory at work in their lives. God has given the mystery for glory and enjoyment. But it is an individual choice whether or not to receive it. God is sovereign, and he has ordained to give it only to those who receive it in his way.

THE MYSTERY REVIEWED

The twenty-eight passages that employ the word "mystery" use the word in a complex manner. Sometimes one particular truth is in view, but at other times many truths are included. Sometimes the emphasis is upon doctrine, but at other times great truths of Christian living are stressed.

In many ways the NT mystery seems to focus on one particular subject: the person and work of Jesus Christ. However, the focus is not on his coming to be the Jewish Messiah, for that was clearly prophesied and expected. Neither does it focus on the salvation of the Gentiles, for that too was clearly prophesied according to Paul.²⁵ Rather the focus of the NT mystery seems to be that this Jesus is not only Messiah and Savior, but that he is also Lord and the only life for both Jews and Gentiles. The NT mystery that caused the Jewish nation to stumble and that still causes so many to stumble is twofold: 1) that Jesus Christ is not only man but also God who is now exalted as Lord of the universe and 2) that the only way of salvation and life is faith in Jesus Christ as our life. These two NT truths were not revealed in the OT and constitute the dividing line between eternal life and eternal death in the matter of salvation and between spiritual victory and spiritual defeat in the matter of the Christian life.

The two passages that define this mystery most clearly are Eph 1:9–10 and Col 1:26–2:3. In Eph 1:9–10 Paul declared that the mystery of God's will is that all things are to be brought together under the headship of Christ. God has now seated Christ in the heavenlies at his own right hand and put all things under his feet (Eph 1:19–23). Christ has now been crowned as Lord of all and someday he will exercise that Lordship and destroy all who resist his sovereign rule. Yet presently he is patiently allowing mankind to bow voluntarily before himself as Lord and thus become a part of his eternal kingdom.²⁶

In Col 1:26–2:3 Paul summarizes the mystery simply as "Christ in you, the hope of glory" (1:27) and then simply as "Christ, in whom all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge are hidden" (2:2–3). It is in Christ that believers are perfected (1:28); it is by his power that

²⁵See, e.g., Acts 15:13–18; Rom 9:24–29; 10:19–20.

²⁶For other passages on the Lordship of Christ see Acts 2:32–36; Rom 10:9–10; 1 Cor 12:3; 15:24–28; Phil 2:9–11; Col 1:14–20; Heb 1:1–14; 2:5–8; Rev 11:15–19; 19:11–21; 20:1–15; 22:1, 3, 5.

they serve (1:29); it is by faith in him that they walk (2:5-7), and it is in him that they have been made complete (2:10). Put simply, salvation is all a work of Jesus Christ who is the head of all rule and authority. The believer's hope of glory is all in Jesus and through his life in us. The "mystery" of the Christian life is that Christ empowers and works in and through believers as they live by faith and obedience.²⁷ All of this was kept hidden in the OT. Thus, it may be concluded that the best definition of the NT mystery is that Jesus Christ is now exalted both as Lord of all and also as the believer's only Life.

However, though the focus of the mystery is Christ, there are many facets of that mystery that all blend together to comprise its fullness. Matt 13:11 and the parallels speak of the mysteries of the kingdom, but the focus is on the King and the various ways people will respond to Jesus Christ as their Lord and Life. Rom 11:25 speaks of the mystery of God's temporary rejection and future restoration of Israel, but the basis of both is again on how they respond to Jesus Christ, the stumblingstone and rock of offense (Rom 9:32-33). Rom 16:25-26 simply refers to the mystery without definition (but cf. 11:25) and lists it as part of the basis upon which God is able to establish believers. 1 Cor 2:1, 7 describes the mystery as the wisdom of God contrasted with the wisdom of men. Paul further describes the wisdom of God as Jesus Christ and him crucified (1:23-25, 30; 2:1-5). In 1 Cor 4:1; 13:2; 14:2 Paul refers to his responsibility to administer and the Corinthians' ability to understand and communicate the mystery. 1 Cor 15:51 introduces the mystery of future resurrection with an eternal body, but again the basis of this blessed hope is the resurrection, exaltation, and present ministry of Christ.

Mystery is repeatedly mentioned in Ephesians and Colossians. Eph 1:9-10 describes the mystery of God's will as the absolute Lordship of Christ. Eph 3:3, 4, and 9 emphasize the salvation of the Gentiles, and especially the fact that now both Jews and Gentiles are saved by faith in Jesus Christ and become fellow members of his body (cf. Eph 2:4-22). The salvation of the Gentiles was known from OT Scripture (cf. Matt 4:14-16; Luke 2:30-32; Acts 15:13-18; Rom 9:24-29; 10:18-21; 15:8-12), so Gentile salvation in itself would not be the mystery "which has been hidden from the ages in God" (Eph 3:9). Rather the mystery is that now all nations are invited alike to share equally in God's grace through Jesus Christ as their Lord and Life. Eph 5:32 describes the mystery of the union of Christ and the church as similar to the one-flesh union of husband and wife. Here it is seen again that the life of the church is totally based in his life, "for we are

²⁷For other passages on the Life of Christ see John 15:1-16; Romans 6-8; Gal 2:16-5:26; Eph 4:7-16; Phil 3:1-15; Col 3:1-17; Heb 4:9-11.

members of His body" (Eph 5:30). Col 1:26–27; 2:2 clearly present the mystery as the person and work of Christ as the only basis for the believer's life. In Eph 6:19 and Col 4:3 Paul speaks of the "mystery of the gospel" and "the mystery of Christ" as the basis of his whole ministry and proclamation (content in both places would have been defined by the earlier references in Eph 1:9–10; Col 1:26–27 and 2:2).

In the pastoral epistles mystery becomes an object of faith and the substance of true godliness. 1 Tim 3:9 demands that deacons must hold "the mystery of the faith in a pure conscience." In 3:16 Paul says true godliness is produced by the great mystery. This mystery concerns the person and work of Christ, "who was revealed in flesh, justified in Spirit, seen by angels, proclaimed among nations, believed on in world, and taken up in glory."

Mystery also occurs in the book of Revelation. Rev 1:20 pictures the mystery of Christ standing among his churches which are troubled, persecuted, or seemingly self-sufficient. Each church receives counsel from him who is its Head and Life. Rev 10:7 describes a time when "the mystery of God shall be finished." Evidently this is when Christ will return and establish his kingdom.

The common thread that links all these passages together is the person and work of Jesus Christ. In particular his exaltation to be Lord of all is emphasized as the only basis for spiritual life and victory. Though there are many facets, the mystery is one.

It is also important to realize that though mystery emphasizes doctrine, it also presents profound truths for Christian living. The mystery can be understood only by those who receive it by faith and apply it in their lives. In one sense even the demons can know and "believe" these facts about Jesus Christ (Jas 2:19). Even so there are many today who recognize that Jesus is Lord, yet they refuse to bow the knee and personally accept him as Lord. But there is also the danger that a person could truly receive Jesus Christ as his Lord but continue to live a shallow, carnal life. In fact, this may be one of the greatest dangers in the church today.²⁸ Though the mystery contains simple truths that "everybody knows," it also demands a lifestyle which is consistent with its truths.

This much can be concluded about the mystery. First, everything about it focuses on the person and the work of Jesus Christ, in particular on his Lordship and his being the very Life of the believer. These truths were not revealed in the OT. Second, though these truths seem simple and basic, they are the foundation of the Christian life. They challenge every believer regardless of his level of maturity. Jesus Christ must really be Lord of all in our attitudes, relationships, words,

²⁸See Matt 7:24–27; James 1:22–26; 2:14–26 for particular warnings on this danger.

ethical decisions, and thoughts. If He is not Lord over all of one's life, there is still much more to learn concerning the mystery of Jesus Christ.

THE MYSTERY RESISTED

Once the mystery is clearly identified as the very will of him who works all things after his own counsel (Eph 1:9, 11), it should come as no surprise that Satan opposes the mystery and any who would seek to live it. Jesus taught this in the parable of the soils (Matt 13:3-9, 18-23). Paul said in 1 Cor 2:6-8 that Satan so manipulated the rulers of this world that they crucified Jesus Christ, the Lord of glory, because they did not know the mystery. In Eph 6:19-20 and Col 4:3-4 Paul viewed his imprisonment as a direct result of Satan's opposition to his proclamation of the mystery. Satan is still resisting the proclamation of the mystery. He is still blinding the minds of unbelievers so that the gospel will remain hidden to them (2 Cor 4:3-4). He is still doing all he can to keep believers from bowing fully before Jesus as Lord and from living in the fullness of His life.

At the time of the end when Jesus Christ is about ready to assume his full Lordship over the earth, Satan will expose a masterpiece of deception, a counterfeit mystery. According to 2 Thess 2:1-12, Satan will empower the antichrist to lead one final world rebellion against God and Jesus Christ as Lord. This "man of lawlessness" who will lead the world in rebellion against God will be the embodiment of the "mystery of lawlessness" (2:7). This counterfeit is already at work in the present age but it will culminate then. God's mystery requires absolute submission to Jesus Christ as Lord and Life. Satan's mystery is absolute lawlessness against that rule and that life. Rev 17:5, 7 indicates that the antichrist will unite with the false religious system of that day. The union is symbolically called "the mystery of the woman and the beast that carried her" (v 7). This counterfeits the biblical picture of Christ and the church as husband and wife (Eph 5:32).

One may conclude from this that the more one seeks to understand and apply the NT mystery, the more he should expect Satanic opposition and attack (e.g. Eph 6:10-12). Unbelievers and carnal believers will not experience such Satanic opposition. Satanic opposition may be disguised as doubts, fears, or temptations. It may come as open persecution. It may subtly come as exciting opportunities and busy schedules which may be misused. One thing is certain—opposition will come. But God is "able to establish us . . . according to the revelation of the mystery" (Rom 16:25).

THE MYSTERY RESOLVED

The same Jesus who introduced the NT mystery in his parables of the kingdom also revealed to John that the day would come when

the mystery would finally be resolved and finished. Rev 10:7 indicates that there will be a day when "the mystery of God is finished." This will occur during the days of the voice of the seventh angel. Rev 11:15 indicates that the voices in heaven will then say, "The kingdom of the world has become that of our Lord and His Christ, and He shall reign forever and ever." Thus the mysteriousness of the mystery will be removed at the end of the tribulation, when Christ shall return, defeat his enemies, and establish his perfect kingdom as "King of kings and Lord of lords" (Rev 19:16). Then the mystery will be visible to all. All will see and acknowledge Jesus Christ as Lord and Life, or they will be cut off and removed. The mysterious element will be removed, and the full reality will be revealed and realized. Then Christ will be Lord and Life of all men. Though there will be a brief rebellion at the end of this thousand-year earthly kingdom (Rev 20:11-13), there will be a final battle when Christ will remove all evil from the earth. He will cast Satan, his demons, all unbelievers, and death and hell into the lake of fire for eternal punishment (Rev 20:10, 14). Then there will be a new heaven and a new earth where the Father and the Son will rule forever (Rev 22:1, 3, 5). Thus the resolution or completion of the mystery will come.

CONCLUSION

It is fitting to conclude with the mystery of Christ among the churches (Rev 1:20). Jesus' analysis of the church at Laodicea is especially relevant. He described a church which claimed great wealth and self-sufficiency. In many ways this description fits the affluent, educated, program-oriented church of the twentieth century in America. But yet as Jesus analyzed the Laodicean church, he saw past all the glory and glitter to a church that on the inside was truly hurting, "wretched and pitiable and poor and blind and naked" (Rev 3:17). It sickened him to see a church with such great potential so totally self-deceived and devoid of real power. Though the church still confessed the doctrinal content of the mystery, its power and reality were lacking in daily life. Possibly much of the church today in America is in a similar situation.

To the Laodiceans and to the church in America Christ counseled, "Buy of Me gold that has been purified by fire in order that you may be rich, and white garments in order that you may clothe yourself and the shame of your nakedness may not appear, and eyesalve to anoint your eyes in order that you may see" (Rev 3:18). The greatest need of the church is not bigger buildings, fatter budgets, sharper programs, or better preachers. It is simply a rediscovery of the riches that are ours when we bow totally before Jesus as Lord and then rise to live the fulness of his life in the power of the Holy Spirit. It is his riches,

his righteousness, and his wisdom that is needed. Then the buildings, the budgets, the programs, and the pastors will burst forth with life and power. "He that has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit is saying to the churches" (Rev 3:21).