

Dial “M” For Mystery

Paul’s use of the Greek word *mysterion* in Ephesians (Eph. 1:9; 3:3; 4, 6, 9; 5:32; 6:19), and it’s parallel letter, Colossians (Col. 1:26, 27, 2:2; 4:3), is often translated as the English word, *mystery*, which is unfortunate. In English, mystery means an encrypted puzzle or secret that’s hard to figure out until someone with enough brainpower can unlock it. That’s exactly what mystery in Paul’s writing does *not* mean. In Ephesians, mystery is something that could not be known apart from God revealing it, which He has now done. The mystery of Christ is given only by revelation of God. That is, unless God reveals His plan, no amount of human ingenuity can “figure it out.” And what is the mystery of the Gospel? That both Jews and Gentiles are full participants in the covenant of grace.

Nevertheless, the Church is not an entirely new invention of God. In the OT, God had given many clues regarding the future constitution of His people. God’s plan is known only by His revelation, and God’s OT revelation indicated the inclusion of Gentiles, in some manner, among the people of God. The seed of the OT church would grow up into the tree of the NT church. The form of that tree would surprise everyone. John Calvin helps explain in what sense the church was a mystery (from *Sermons on Ephesians*).

But first we must resolve a question that might be put here, because the patriarchs were not utterly ignorant what should ensue, and the prophets bare testimony to it. For when there is any talk that the Gentiles should be joined with the people whom God had chosen and adopted before, it is said that Moses foretold and uttered, and that all the prophets said that the strangers should come to worship God and to honor his majesty. [Rom 10:19, 20] It was not, then, something utterly unknown at that time, as St. Paul says of it, but yet let us note that all those prophets did not cease to be obscure, because the means were hidden. It is true that the hope of the faithful was that God would one day gather together the world that was scattered after so dreadful a manner as we have seen; but with reference to the knowledge of the time that circumcision and the types of the law should be abolished, that God should be served after another better known fashion, that Jesus Christ should be as the sun of righteousness, that men should be content with him, that there should be no more visible emblems but baptism and the Lord’s Supper with which to confirm us in all the spiritual gifts which we obtain this day— all this, I say, was unknown. And the very apostles themselves continued still in that gross ignorance, despite the fact that our Lord Jesus Christ warned them of the things that were at hand. It is true that when he sent them into the land of Judaea he said to them, Speak not yet unto the Gentiles. [Matt 10:5] But that was because the appropriate time had not yet come.

When he drew towards his death, “I have other sheep (he said) that are not of this fold which must be gathered together.” [Jn 10:16] There he showed that many were chosen by God his Father, who nevertheless were not comprised in the nation of the Jews. And when he was risen again from the dead, he said, Go, preach the Gospel to all creatures. [Mk 16:15] Here, then, is commandment first given them to preach the hope of salvation to such as were utter strangers to it before. Now when St. Peter was given notice that God would send him to a Gentile man, he was so amazed at it that the hairs of his head stood on end. [Acts 10:14] And how is it possible? God had to send him a vision from heaven to make him go to a man whom he regarded as unclean.

So then, it is not without reason that St. Paul, speaking here of such a great and lofty secret, says, it was unknown to the patriarchs and prophets. They had indeed some inkling of it; however, that was according to their measure, and under shadows and types. There was not, then, any certain knowledge until God had displayed in effect that which he had kept in his own counsel.

