

Part 20: Premillennialism and the Church as a Mystery

by John F. Walvoord

The church is a separate purpose of God, with distinctive qualities that are in contrast to anything known to Israel in either history or prophecy.

Scripture: Ephesians 3:3, Colossians 1:26, Colossians 2:9, Colossians 3:4, Colossians 3:11

Topics: "Church Mystery", "Premillennialism"

Description

John F. Walvoord delves into the concept of the church as a mystery in the New Testament, emphasizing its distinct character from Old Testament saints and its revelation as a purpose of God separate from Israel. The mysteries revealed in the New Testament regarding the church, particularly the mystery of the one body in Ephesians, highlight the equality of Gentiles and Jews in the body of Christ, a truth hidden in the Old Testament but now made known. The revelation of the church as an organism in Colossians further emphasizes the indwelling of Christ in believers, contrasting the present age church with the future promises to Israel in the millennial kingdom.

Transcript

In the previous study of premillennialism and the church, it was brought out that the church is a body of believers in this age distinct in character from the Old Testament saints. Further, it was shown that the present age is a parenthesis or a time period not predicted by the Old Testament and therefore not fulfilling or advancing the program of events revealed in the Old Testament foreview. The present study occupies itself with the positive revelation in the New Testament of the church in its character as a mystery.

The question is whether the main elements of the church in the present age which are revealed as mysteries support the conclusion that the church is a purpose of God separate from Israel. It should be obvious that this is vital to premillennialism. If the church fulfills the Old Testament promises to Israel of a righteous kingdom on earth, the amillenarians are right. If the church does not fulfill these predictions and in fact is the fulfillment of a purpose of God not revealed until the New Testament, then the premillenarians are right. A study of the mysteries related to the church which are revealed in the New Testament is an important contribution to the positive evidence in favor of premillennialism.

The church is never expressly called a mystery. The term mystery is used, however, of the distinctive elements of the truth concerning the church as the body of Christ. Contemporary with the apostolic age various mystery cults held sway. They were so called because their rites of initiation were mysteries or secrets to those not in the cult. Initiation consisted of various rites in which the novitiate was introduced to these mysteries. The word came therefore to be used of significant facts once hidden but now revealed.

This idea is carried forward in the New Testament in passages where pivotal truths concerning the church as the body of Christ are described as mysteries. The truths thus revealed are not incomprehensible or obscure, as is sometimes meant by the modern use of the word mystery. It is rather that the truth relating to the church was once hidden, i.e., in the Old Testament, but is now revealed in the New Testament. Edwards correctly defines the word mystery, "a secret imparted only to the initiated, what is unknown until it is revealed, whether it be easy or hard to understand." [1] D. Miall Edwards, "Mystery," International Standard Bible Encyclopaedia, III, 2104.

The Mystery of the One Body

The New Testament revelation concerning the mystery of the one body is given in express terms in Ephesians 3:1-12. While the truth is an unfolding of the nature of the church in the present age and the relation of Gentiles to it, this passage has a vital bearing on the millennial issue. Allis devotes a whole chapter on "Paul's Doctrine of the Church" to the exegesis of this one passage in an effort to sustain his attack on the premillennial position. [2] Oswald T. Allis, Prophecy and the Church, pp. 90-110. It is lamentable, however, that he ignores so many other pertinent passages in the process.

Content of the mystery. In the Ephesian passage the content of the mystery is stated: "...by revelation was made known unto me the mystery, as I wrote before in few words, whereby, when ye read, ye can perceive my understanding in the mystery of Christ; which is other generations was not made known unto the sons of men, as it hath now been revealed unto his holy apostles and prophets in the Spirit; to wit, that the Gentiles are fellow-heirs, and fellow-members of the body, and fellow-partakers of the promise in Christ through the gospel" (Eph 3:3-6). The purpose of the revelation is given in the words: "to make all men see what is the dispensation of the mystery which for ages hath been hid in God who created all things" (Eph 3:9).

Even an ordinary reading of this passage will reveal the central feature of the mystery. It is that Gentiles should have an absolute equality with the Jews in the body of Christ: "fellow-heirs," "fellow-members," and "fellow-partakers of the promise in Christ through the gospel." This central fact is admitted by Allis in these words: "The mystery is, that the Gentiles are to enjoy, actually do enjoy, a status of complete equality with the Jews in the Christian Church.... They belong to the same body.... This important feature of the Christian Church was the mystery." [3] Ibid., p. 92.

Was the mystery partially revealed in the Old Testament? Having agreed with premillenarians on the central meaning of the passage, however, Allis takes back with his left hand what he has conceded with his right. His thought is that the mystery was not completely hidden, but only partially hidden: "It was a mystery in the sense that, like other teachings which are spoken of as such, it was not fully revealed in the Old Testament and was completely hidden from the carnally minded." [4] Loc. cit. He believes that this point of view is sustained by two arguments: first, in the text itself by the qualifying "as" clause, and, second, by his argument that "Clearly the equality of Gentile with Jew was predicted in the Old Testament." [5] Ibid., p. 95.

According to Allis, there are three limitations on the thought that the mystery was a new truth: "This declaration taken by itself would seem to imply that it was absolutely new. So we must note that it is at once qualified by three supplementary and limiting statements: (1) 'as it hath now been revealed,' (2) 'unto his holy apostles and prophets in the Spirit,' (3) 'that the Gentiles are fellow-heirs, and fellow-members of the body, and fellow-partakers of the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel.'" [6] Ibid., p. 91. It should be clear to any impartial observer that Allis is straining to tone down and qualify the tremendous revelation given in this passage. The second and third points of his "supplementary and limiting statements" are nothing of the sort, but rather very important details of the mystery itself. Point two indicates the channel--New Testament apostles and prophets, and point three the content of the mystery itself. Referring to these points as limitations would be like considering the deity and humanity of Christ as "supplementary and limiting" attributes of the Second Person.

The first point of his series of three is the only point worthy of debate. Just what is the significance of the clause "as it hath now been revealed"? According to Allis, the meaning is that the mystery was not revealed in the Old Testament as it is now revealed--i.e., it was revealed but in lesser detail and was not comprehended then.

Any student of the New Testament Greek will find it rather amazing that a scholarly writer would in this way ignore the other possibilities in this grammatical construction. Allis is assuming that the only possible interpretation is a restrictive clause. The Greek word $\omega\sigma\tau\epsilon$, here translated "as," is subject to many interpretations. It is used principally as a relative adverb of manner and as a conjunction in the New Testament. A. T. Robertson in one of many discussions of this word lists its various uses as "exclamatory," "declarative," "temporal," and used with superlatives, comparatives, and correlatives. [7] A. T. Robertson, *A Grammar of the Greek New Testament*, pp. 967-69. He notes further that basically most clauses of this kind are "adjectival." [8] Ibid., pp. 953-54. While used in an adverbial clause in this passage, the force grammatically is relative. [9] Loc. cit. Robertson says significantly in this connection, "The relative clause may indeed have the resultant effect of cause, condition, purpose or result, but in itself it expresses none of these things. It is like the participle in this respect. One must not read into it more than is there" (italics added). [10] Ibid., p. 956. This warning evidently has not been heeded by Allis in his discussion. He has assumed that a clause which is normally an adjectival idea, i.e., merely giving additional information, is a restrictive--qualifying absolutely the preceding statement. In support of his arbitrary classification of this clause, he supplies no grammatical argument whatever, and gives the impression that his interpretation is the only possible one.

Stifler in his discussion, of the "as" clause refutes the position of Allis and cites Acts 2:15 and 20:24 as substantiating evidence: "The contrast here, as Colossians i.26 shows, is between the other ages and 'now.' It may be further remarked on this Ephesian passage that the 'as' does not give a comparison between degrees of revelation in the former time and 'now.' It denies that there was any revelation at all of the mystery in that former time; just as if one should tell a man born blind that the sun does not shine in the night as it does in daytime. It does not shine at all by night. Certainly there is no comparison by 'as' in Acts ii.15 ; xx.24 . 'As' with a negative in the preceding clause has not received the attention which it deserves. It is sometimes almost equivalent to 'but' (1 Cor vii.31)." [11] James M. Stifler, *The Epistle to the Romans, a Commentary Logical and Historical*, p. 273.

In other words, the "as" clause is purely descriptive and does not qualify the mystery as only partially hidden in the Old Testament. The evidence is definitely in favor of the interpretation which regards the mystery as completely hidden until revealed in the New Testament.

Allis states in the early part of his discussion, that the word mystery occurs "29 times in the New Testament." [12] Allis, op. cit., p. 90. Of these many instances the passage in Ephesians is the only one with the "as" clause. The others make the most absolute statements about the mystery being hidden. Allis carefully avoids a passage like Colossians 1:26 where the mystery is stated in absolute terms as completely hidden: "even the mystery which hath been hid for ages and generations: but now hath it been manifested to his saints." If there is any question about the interpretation of this clause it should be settled by parallel passages which point clearly to the idea that the "as" clause is merely added information--descriptive or adjectival rather than restrictive.

Allis justifies his exegesis by claiming that the general equality of Gentile and Jew is predicted clearly in the Old Testament. In his own words he states, "Clearly, the equality of Gentile with Jew was predicted in the Old Testament." A search of his argument for proof-texts on this point reveals none whatever. In other words, the two most important aspects of his argument are asserted but not proved.

The fact is that the thought of equality of Jew and Gentile is never mentioned in the great kingdom passages of the Old Testament. The Jews correctly interpreted such passages as Isaiah 61:5-6 as indicating their supremacy in the predicted kingdom age: "And strangers shall stand and feed your flocks, and foreigners shall be your plowmen and vinedressers. But ye shall be named priests of Jehovah; men shall call you the ministers of our God: ye shall eat the wealth of the nations, and in their glory shall ye boast yourselves." Isaiah 2:1-4 teaches the same truth of Israel's exaltation in the kingdom age. The seat of government shall be in Jerusalem and from Zion the law will go forth.

It is true, as Allis points out, that Gentiles are promised great blessing in the kingdom age. They are promised salvation, material blessing, peace, tranquillity, and a share in the glory of that era. None of these promised blessings are extended to Gentiles on the ground of equality, however, and this is the point of the mystery.

Does the Old Testament teach the doctrine of the one body? The crux of the issue is whether Jews and Gentiles are presented as the same body in the Old Testament. Any literal interpretation of the Old Testament will make plain that the purpose of God revealed for Israel in the millennial kingdom is quite different from the purpose of God in the present age in relation to the church as the body of Christ. Only by spiritualizing the Old Testament prophetic passages can the viewpoint of Allis be sustained. Allis himself admits this in the following statement: "This conception of the mystery is entirely due to the insistence of Dispensationalists that the kingdom promises to Israel must be literally fulfilled, and therefore that the complete equality of Jew with Gentile in the Church is utterly at variance with the Old Testament and necessitates the view that the Church age is quite distinct from the kingdom age." [13] Ibid, p. 99. In other words, the only way he can sustain his contention that the mystery is not wholly new is by application of the spiritualizing principle of interpretation to the key passages of the Old Testament. The Old Testament strictly maintains the distinction between Jew and Gentile, distinguishes their hope, their promises, and God's dealing with them. That is the main point of the Old Testament. The idea that Jews and Gentiles might be united in one entity without any distinction whatever, with equal privileges, rights, and fellowship is foreign to the Old Testament.

Relation to premillennialism. Of importance to premillennialism is the obvious conclusion that if God's present dealings with the body of Christ do not fulfill His promises concerning the kingdom age then a future fulfillment is demanded. The central concept of the church as the body of Christ including Jew and Gentile on an equal basis is described as a mystery in this passage. As such, it is described as "not made

known" and "hid in God" until the time of the New Testament. This one passage certainly constitutes a stumbling block to any interpretation which attempts to find millennial kingdom promises fulfilled in the present age.

The Church as an Organism

Of the mysteries relating to the church, the revelation in Colossians of the church as an organism is most important. In the mystery of the one body, the equality of Jew and Gentile is stressed. In this mystery the church as an organism is presented with the distinctive feature of being indwelt by Christ Himself.

Christ in you. In Colossians 1:26-27 the central feature of this mystery is described as the fact of the indwelling Christ: "The mystery which hath been hid for ages and generations: but now hath it been manifested to his saints, to whom God was pleased to make known what is the riches of the glory of this mystery among the Gentiles, which is Christ in you, the hope of glory." The passage begins by affirming in most absolute terms that the truth here revealed was "hid for ages and generations." The truth is then defined as "Christ in you." It is significant that Allis in his argument attempting to show that truth concerning the church as the body of Christ was partially revealed in the Old Testament does not so much as mention this verse of Scripture. The truth is that the Old Testament, while speaking of the coming Messiah both in suffering and in glory, never once anticipates such a situation, as "Christ in you." While some passages picture the Holy Spirit as indwelling the believer in the coming kingdom, the Second Person is never so presented.

In the preceding context (Col 1:24), the entity thus indwelt by Christ is identified as the body and the church. The enlarging revelation comprehends the church as the body of both Jew and Gentile believers in this age indwelt by Christ Himself. This, of course, has been predicted by Christ in the Upper Room in John 14:20, and was a part of His prayer in John 17:23. Here is amazing condescension--the Lord of glory dwelling in vessels of clay. The truth is described as "the riches of the glory of this mystery" and the fact of the indwelling Christ is called "the hope of glory."

Everything in this passage stands in contrast to the Old Testament doctrine of the millennial kingdom. There the glory of the Lord will be manifest to all the earth and His dwelling is with men. Here His glory is veiled, but His presence is the hope of future glory. It is difficult to imagine a greater contrast between the position of Christ in the believer in this age and the position of Christ in the millennial kingdom.

Christ the fullness of the Godhead bodily. The significance of this tremendous revelation is subject to enlargement in later portions of Colossians. In Colossians 2:9-19 Christ is presented as possessing "all the fulness of the Godhead bodily," with the result that those who are indwelt by Christ are also "made full," or complete. On this ground they are warned against fleshly observance of ordinances or worshiping of angels. By contrast, Christ is the "Head, from whom all the body, being supplied and knit together through the joints and bands, increaseth with the increase of God" (Col 2:19). Here again, as the theme of the mystery is enlarged, there is truth utterly foreign to Israel's covenants. Israel is regarded as a nation, a theocracy, and people, among whom God dwells. The church is regarded as a living organism in whom Christ dwells, united by vital life and growing by inner spiritual supply. Again it may be seen that, while the church itself is not described by the term mystery, the central features of the church are. In other words, if the qualities observed here which are the very essence of the church in the present age are described as mysteries, it is not too much to regard the church itself as unheralded in the Old Testament.

The indwelling Christ the hope of glory. As far as the Old Testament foreview is concerned, Israel's hope of glory was the glorious return of Christ in His second advent. They were promised a share in His glorious government of the earth during the kingdom. By contrast, for the believer now the indwelling Christ is declared to be the "hope of glory" (Col 1:27). This thought is enlarged in Colossians 3.

In Colossians 3:4 it is revealed, "When Christ, who is our life, shall be manifested, then shall ye also with him be manifested in glory." The indwelling Christ is integral with the believer's hope. He is equated with our present existence as "our life" and with our future as the promise of fully manifested glory when He is glorified. The ultimate goal of spiritual experience is reached in Colossians 3:11 when the believer enters into the truth, that "Christ is all, and in all."

The revelation given in Colossians is in sharp contrast to the Old Testament revelation. Allis misses the point when he identifies the mystery as "Christ" or the "gospel" or the "will" of God, or "the faith." [14] Ibid., p. 90. The mystery is not in the general truths relating to Christ or the gospel, but in the particular detail which is revealed in this context. The mystery is Christ indwelling. Allis is partly right that the person involved or general subject is not entirely unknown in a mystery. [15] Loc. cit. It is the particular truth revealed for the first time that is the mystery. An examination of these particular truths reveal that they are the distinctive qualities relating to the church in contrast to Israel's promises.

The two great mysteries which have been discussed thus far constitute the essential and distinctive qualities of the church. The mysteries considered are in sharp contrast to anything known to Israel in either history or prophecy. The church is composed of Jew and Gentile on exactly the same terms and the same fellowship, united in the one body of Christ in such a way that both are cut off from their distinctive national program and introduced into vitally different order. In this new relationship, they enjoy individually the indwelling presence of Christ as the ground of present experience and hope of future glory. The church historically has lost much by the blurring of these distinctive truths in the attempt to combine the spiritual destinies of Israel and the church. While in themselves they are sufficient to label the church as a mystery on the ground that its essential qualities are mysteries, these truths are supported by two other great mysteries which point to the same conclusion, namely, the mystery of the translation of the saints and the mystery of the bride. These are next to be considered.

Source: <https://sermonindex.net/speakers/john-f-walvoord/part-20-premillennialism-and-the-church-as-a-mystery/>

Grow in Your Walk with Christ

Listen and read messages that will stir your heart for Christ and point you to deeper repentance and devotion.

- 50,000+ Sermons from speakers past and present
- 3,900+ Classic Christian Books freely readable online
- 1,200+ Bible Translations and Commentaries
- Over 450k forum posts — Join our vibrant online Christian forum

www.sermonindex.net