

Part 21: Premillennialism and the Church as a Mystery

by John F. Walvoord

The sermon explores the mysteries of the translation of the saints and the church, revealing the significance of these truths in supporting the premillennial position and the pretribulation interpretation.

Scripture: Ephesians 5:25

Topics: "Eschatology", "Church Doctrine"

Description

John F. Walvoord delves into 'The Mystery of the Translation of the Saints,' emphasizing the vital significance of this doctrine in the millennial debate. The revelation in 1 Corinthians 15:51-52 unveils the mystery of believers being transformed in a moment, either through resurrection or translation, at the coming of the Lord. This mystery contradicts amillennial interpretations and supports the premillennial position, particularly the pretribulation view. Additionally, the sermon explores 'The Mystery of the Bride' in Ephesians 5, illustrating the profound relationship between Christ and the church as a mystery revealed in the New Testament.

Transcript

The Mystery of the Translation of the Saints

The doctrine of the translation of the saints has been often neglected in the discussion of the millennial question. It has been assumed that the Scriptural revelation of the translation of the saints has no vital bearing on the debate concerning the millennium. Allis, for instance, does not discuss the main passage of 1 Corinthians 15:51-52 at all in his attack on premillennialism.[1] Allis, *Prophecy and the Church*. Premillenarians have not always been aware of the strategic force of this revelation in support of the premillennial position either. Much of this neglect has accompanied a failure to realize the tremendous significance of this and other truths designated as mysteries in the New Testament.

The content of the mystery of the translation. In the fifteenth chapter of 1 Corinthians the general subject of the resurrection of the human body is discussed. The resurrection of Christ and its certainty is presented first and the whole structure of Christian doctrine is seen to depend upon the resurrection of Christ. The necessity of resurrection of all men is then discussed in full, concluding in 1 Corinthians 15:50, "Now this I say, brethren, that flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God; neither doth corruption inherit incorruption."

The necessity having been shown for a change from a corruptible body to an incorruptible normally accomplished by resurrection, a dramatic new revelation is introduced: "Behold, I tell you a mystery: We all shall not sleep, but we shall all be changed in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trump; for the trumpet shall sound, and the dead shall be raised incorruptible, and we shall be changed (1 Cor 15:51-52).

This passage reveals that there are two possible ways by which a corruptible body can be transformed into an incorruptible: one way is by resurrection; the other is by translation. This latter truth is introduced as a "mystery." It should be clear to all careful students of the Word of God that it is not a mystery that saints who die will be raised again. The doctrine of resurrection is taught in both the Old and New Testaments and is not a hidden truth. Nor is it a mystery that there will be living saints on the earth at the time of the coming of the Lord. All passages dealing with the second advent as well as passages which speak of Christ coming for His church assume or state that saints will be on earth awaiting His coming. The precise mystery is the added revelation of the fact of translation without dying in connection with the coming of the Lord.

A common assumption of amillennialism is that living saints will be translated at the time of the second advent. There is seldom any facing of the significant fact that none of the Old Testament passages dealing with the second advent teach anything on the subject of the translation of the saints. In fact, the idea of a general translation is foreign to the Old Testament. The viewpoint of Old Testament prophecies is that saints on earth at the time of the second advent will enter the millennial kingdom in the flesh, an obvious contradiction of the idea of translation. This is clearly taught by the fact that saints will till the ground, raise crops, and have children born to them, all of which would be quite incredible for translated saints. It is safe to say that no passage in the Old or New Testament which is accepted by all parties as relating to the second advent of Christ at the end of the tribulation period ever speaks of translation of the saints. All passages dealing with translation concern the coming of Christ for His church which is distinguished from the second coming proper.

Significance of the revelation. It is surprising that the tremendous significance of the 1 Corinthians passage has been overlooked by so many scholars. As it relates to amillennialism, its main point is its contradiction of the amillennial interpretation of the second advent. Never in Scripture are the Old Testament saints or the saints of the future tribulation promised translation. The thought of translation is in fact a pure mystery, a truth not revealed at all in the Old Testament. It is peculiarly the hope of saints in the present age and is not extended anywhere in the Scripture to the saints who will live in the tribulation period.

The chief force of the passage, however, relates to the controversy between pretribulationists and posttribulationists who accept premillennialism in general. While this will be discussed later in relating premillennialism to the tribulation, it should be pointed out that any literal interpretation of this passage makes posttribulationism an impossibility. The normal premillennial position is that saints on earth at the second advent will enter the millennium and will be in the flesh, produce children, and have normal earthly experiences in contrast to resurrected or translated saints who will have spiritual bodies. It is obviously impossible to incorporate a translation of all saints at the end of the tribulation and the beginning of the millennium as it would result in all saints receiving a spiritual body, leaving none to populate the earth in the millennium. The fumbling of Scriptural revelation on this point by both amillennialists and premillennialists has only served to obscure the real issues in the millennial controversy.

A clear understanding of the mystery of the translation of the saints will serve, therefore, to support the premillennial position in general and the pretribulation interpretation in particular. It also substantiates the interpretation of a mystery as a truth revealed in the New Testament but hidden in the Old. The hope of their reunion with their loved ones at the coming of the Lord, which they regarded as imminent. The nature of this comfort is also most illuminating. It is not simply the fact of resurrection, but the time of the resurrection. They apparently knew that a period of trouble was predicted for the earth. They expected the Lord to return at any time before this trouble would begin. Their comfort was that their loved ones would be resurrected at the same time as their translation, not at some later resurrection such as might precede the establishment of the kingdom on earth. Their comfort was based, then, on the hope of the imminency of the coming of the Lord and the expectation that this would also result in reunion with loved ones who had fallen asleep in Christ. The nature of their expectation distinguishes it from the second coming of Christ to the earth and supports the distinction between the translation of the church and the events related to the second advent.

The Mystery of the Bride

In connection with a series of exhortations in Ephesians 5, the proper relationship of husbands to wives is illustrated by the relationship of Christ to the church. It is revealed that Christ "loved the church, and gave himself up for it" (Eph 5:25). The purpose of His sacrifice is "that he might sanctify it, having cleansed it by the washing of water with the word, that he might present the church to himself a glorious church, not having spot or wrinkle or any such thing; but that it should be holy and without blemish" (Eph 5:26-27). Upon the ground of this illustration, husbands are exhorted to love their wives. The statement is made, "Even so ought husbands also to love their own wives as their own bodies" (Eph 5:28). It is declared to be a most natural thing to love one's own body as further illustrated in the love of Christ for the church, "because we are members of his body" (Eph 5:30). The marriage union results in man and wife becoming "one flesh" (Eph 5:31). As applied to the church, it is then affirmed, "This mystery is great: but I speak in regard of Christ and of the church" (Eph 5:32). The Book of Hosea is devoted to a historical allegory of this relationship. Israel is pictured as an untrue wife to be restored in millennial days. It should be borne in mind that this is a figure and not an actual marriage. By contrast the church in figure is described as a pure virgin being prepared for future marriage. In view of the Old Testament relationship, in what sense is the relationship of Christ to the church a mystery?

The mystery is not explained in Ephesians 5. The mystery is certainly not the sacrament of marriage--the Roman Church translates the verse: "This is a great sacrament" (Eph 5:32, Douay Version), an obvious error carried over from the Vulgate.[4] Even Catholic writers admit this. Cf. Jamieson, Fausset, Brown, A Commentary, Critical, Experimental, and Practical, on the Old and New Testaments, VI, 419. It is rather the concept of mystery as elsewhere in the New Testament--a truth hitherto not revealed but now made known. The reference in this passage is to the union between Christ and the church composed of Gentile and Jewish believers in the present age. Such a union is never contemplated in the Old Testament. The thought of the body of Christ as the church is a New Testament revelation as well as a New Testament work of God. While Israel as a nation was joined to God in a spiritual union, the new entity of the body of Christ in this age is never contemplated in such a relationship. It is therefore a revelation of the union of love binding Christ and the church in addition to the union of life indicated in the figure of the one body.

The various mystery aspects of the church combine to form a united testimony. The features therein revealed are foreign to divine revelation given in the Old Testament. They are related to the church as a distinct entity in the present age. They mark out the church as a separate purpose of God to be

consummated before the resumption of the divine program for Israel.

Premillennialism is therefore related to the church primarily in maintaining the distinctions between the church and Israel which are so confused by the amillenarians and at the same time distinguishing the purpose of God for the present age from other ages past or future. This form of interpretation provides a literal and natural exegesis of the key passages which is honoring to the Word of God and furnishing an intelligent understanding of the program of God in past, present, and future ages.

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