

The Secret Revealed

by T. Austin-Sparks

The revelation of Christ is essential for understanding the mystery of God's will and the warfare of the Church, and it requires a willingness to accept and go through with all that is involved.

Scripture: Ephesians 3:5

Topics: "Unity in the Church", "Revelation of Christ"

Description

T. Austin-Sparks emphasizes the significance of the revelation of the mystery of Christ as shared by the Apostle Paul, who, while unique in his understanding, is not exclusive in this revelation. He argues that the fullness of the Gospel encompasses both salvation and the deeper truths of God's purpose, urging believers to embrace the vastness of God's revelation rather than settling for a simplistic understanding. Sparks highlights the importance of spiritual enlightenment through the Holy Spirit, which allows believers to truly see Christ and understand their identity within the Church. He warns against the dangers of division within Christianity and stresses that true unity is found in the revelation of Christ, which transcends denominational barriers. Ultimately, the sermon calls for a deeper engagement with the mystery of God as revealed in Christ, which is essential for spiritual growth and the fulfillment of God's purpose.

Transcript

"...it hath now been revealed unto His holy apostles and prophets in the Spirit";

"According to the purpose of the ages (R.V. margin) which He purposed in Christ Jesus our Lord" (Eph. 3:5,11).

As we now arrive at the very heart of the whole matter, it is necessary to repeat, firstly, that the Apostle Paul does not claim exclusiveness in the revelation of the long hidden mystery. While he certainly and positively does claim that it was revealed to him in a specific and particular way, and that this revelation constituted him a particular "steward," and that he was chosen and dealt with by the Lord in a way which especially related to this purpose, yet he includes "His holy apostles and prophets" in the knowledge of the long-hidden, but now unveiled, secret. It is evident that Paul did have a fuller "understanding" and perhaps a unique apprehension of it, but it is not difficult to find at least partial traces of this knowledge in Peter and John, as it was also true in Stephen.

We must also emphasize that Paul's was not a different Gospel from that preached by the others, and certainly Paul did not have two Gospels, one concerning "Salvation" and the other concerning "The

Mystery." How often have we heard Christians say that they are only interested in "the simple Gospel," "the Gospel of salvation," and that they are not interested in "deeper teaching or truth." Paul would have been both surprised and grieved to hear such language, for his "Gospel" was one, and he would say that the fullest and deepest revelation is the Gospel. There can only be tragic and grievous loss and weakness resulting from failure to see that "the whole counsel of God" is the Gospel. The position so much to be deplored in great numbers of Christians is so largely due to fallacy: the fallacy that it is unwise, if not futile, to give the greatness and immensity of God's revelation in Christ to either the unsaved or to young Christians. Let them be made aware of the vastness of that to which they are called! A little Christ and a little Christianity will produce little Christians! Some of the best and strongest Christians that we have known came to the Lord in gatherings where the greatness of Christ was being unfolded to Christians, and Christians in responsibility. "Back to the simple Gospel" can be a snare and a sop to those who do not really mean business with God!

At the time of writing this we are in the midst of having work done on our present home. Hammers and drills are making such a noise as to almost deafen. The workmen are explaining, "This house is well built. The bricks are not just put together with ordinary sand cement, but with concrete, and it is very hard work to make a hole." God's building is like that, whereas men build--not for eternity--but for the present. But, mark you, it is not just deep teaching that we advocate, but Holy Spirit unveiling of Christ.

That brings us to the message and substance of this letter in particular. Standing before it we find ourselves facing some of the greatest questions and problems with which men have been, and still are, wrestling in the realm of Christianity. This letter answers them, but how few there are who see the answer, and fewer still who--if they glimpse it--are prepared to follow it. In a time of well-nigh worldwide war there have been those countries which have taken no share in the conflict and have missed the honours because "they were not free to participate."

Internal complications, divisions, and commitments bound their hands and made them neutrals. Fear, self-interest, and failure to recognize the great moral interests kept them as "isolationists." Let us at once affirm that "The Letter to the Ephesians" represents the greatest religious crisis in the history of the world. It tells us that, out from the past eternity has come the revelation of a secret which God had kept hidden from all previous ages. The revelation has introduced and inaugurated a dispensation of greater importance and significance than any age before it.

It tells us that for the ministering of this revelation God chose, prepared and appointed an instrument of a particular kind; one formed by God in a particular way. This instrument--Paul--was never ordained or appointed to this work by men, although he was recognized and "sent forth" by the Church. He was never taught or prepared for his work by man. He received everything direct and at first hand from Heaven. He was dealt with by the Lord in a way that wholly corresponded with the purpose for which he was chosen.

The Letter which is before us goes to the heart of a matter which has been growingly occupying the most serious consideration of all Christendom and is the matter which is perhaps more to the fore today than any other. It is the matter of very real consequence to all Christians but, unfortunately, it has been lifted above the ordinary person by a highbrow term which is so widely employed. The word or term which has been so much used since about the year 1900 is "Ecumenical," a word from another language.

Of course, something impressive is lost if its simple meaning is employed, which is "worldwide"; and its present instrument is what is known as "The World Council." This "Council" is laboriously applying itself to

discover a solution to the chaos and complications of divisions in Christendom. For centuries the various sections--called "Denominations" or "Churches"--of Christendom have tenaciously held to the position that they were each originated and justified on a basis of Scriptural authority.

Every division has made that claim, and finds its strength in that conviction. Now the slogan of the "World Council," or Ecumenical Movement, is "these man-made divisions" which must be got rid of. For one of its great convocations the subject chosen was "The Order of God and the Disorder of Man." This was subsequently changed to "Man's Disorder and God's Design." But every attempt to resolve this problem, whether it be in general or even among evangelicals, meets with unsolvable difficulties, and the only recourse is to tolerate or compromise on matters of serious account.

So a number of compromises has to be introduced into the programme for unity. The great problem of divisions in Christianity is as hopeless of solving by human recourses as are the many inter-racial problems.

This, then, is the tremendous situation which this Letter deals with and answers. We have already seen that this great spirit of schism had its beginning far back at some dateless point in Heaven, dividing angelic hosts into two irreconcilable camps; later it involved the earth and has had a long, long history, gaining momentum in ever multiplying and intensifying wars. Then it invaded Christianity and the entail is grievous indeed. So, it is no small thing that this Letter deals with and to which it gives the answer.

We have also seen that the heart of this whole matter is reached and touched by one phrase which sums up the purpose of God at the end. That phrase is: "Unto a dispensation of the fulness of the times, to sum up (reunite) all things in Christ, the things in the heavens, and the things upon the earth; in Him, I say..." (Eph. 1:10). But, while we may embrace that as the end, beyond this age, our concern is for this age. Is there no way or hope for at least an approximation to that now? The Letter would surely leave us in our dilemma if it only pointed to a future age and had no answer to the present tragedy. But it has the answer. This answer is given by several means and ways. Perhaps the simplest, most direct, and most helpful way will be to let Paul himself be the answer. Seeing that the Apostle makes such strong and categorical claims as to his own personal revelation, it will be best to examine that revelation, and what it did in this man's life. We noted at the end of chapter four that the personal name of Jesus Christ is mentioned some forty times in this short letter, plus all the pronouns "He," "Him," "His," "Whom." This, in itself, is the strong clue. In his Letter to the Galatians Paul made the statement in these words:

"An apostle (not from men, neither through man, but through Jesus Christ, and God the Father...);"

"Neither did I receive it from man... but through revelation of Jesus Christ";

"It was the good pleasure of God... to reveal His Son in me" (Gal. 1:1,12,15,16).

In the Letter to the Ephesians which is our present consideration the Apostle makes much of revelation; indeed, he bases all the "full knowledge" upon a "spirit of wisdom and revelation." Very well, then; the answer to this great question which is before us and which is the occasion of all this feverish discussion and deliberation in Christendom is found in the revelation and apprehension of God's Son. It is wholly a question as to whether or not God's Son has been really seen by an operation of the Holy Spirit.

The kind of seeing to which we refer is an epoch, an encounter, a revelation, a crisis. There is no power on this earth which could have changed that rabid, fanatical, bigoted Saul of Tarsus, a "Pharisee of the

Pharisees," into "the apostle of the Gentiles" (Rom. 11:13; A.V.); the fierce and intolerant persecutor and destroyer of everything and everybody related to Jesus of Nazareth into His greatest friend, advocate and devotee! Argument would not have done it. Neither persuasion nor persecution nor martyrdom would have effected it. But it was done! That "conversion" stood the test of all the persecutions, sufferings, and adversities possible to man for the rest of his life. Moreover, it provided the substance of the greatest of all apostolic ministries; so intrinsic as to have extended and exhausted all efforts, through many centuries, to fathom, explain and comprehend. What did it? Paul would answer, "It pleased God... to reveal His Son in me"; or, in other words, "I have seen Jesus Christ."

Right at the foundation and root of this man's life was a "seeing" which split his life in two and emancipated him from the tightly bound fetters of a mighty tradition. He said, 'The God of the great creative fiat Who said Let light be, and there was light, shined into my heart, and in that act and light I saw the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ' (2 Cor. 4:6). In that face Paul saw God's eternal purpose as to man. He saw God's method of realizing His purpose. He saw the vast significance of God's Son in creation and in the universe: and he saw--in that One--the Church as His Body.

We cannot make too much of this matter of revelation, illumination, seeing. It is basic in salvation (Acts 26:18). It is essential to effective ministry (2 Cor. 4:6) and it is indispensable to full knowledge and full growth (Eph. 1:17). Jesus made a tremendous amount of spiritual seeing, as a reading of John's Gospel will show. "Eyes" were--in His teaching--a criterion of life or death. Indeed, a fundamental and pre-eminent work of the Holy Spirit has to do with spiritual enlightenment and that supremely as to the significance of God's Son, Jesus Christ. It is all in the Scriptures, but still our eyes may be holden. Let us be quite categorical in stating that we can never see the Church until we have seen the Son of God, and we cannot truly see the Son of God without seeing the Church. This is the point in the incident at Caesarea Philippi (Matthew 16:16-18). Leave all your debate of whether Peter is the Rock on which the Church is built and light on the real key to what Jesus said: "Flesh and blood hath not revealed it unto thee, but My Father which is in heaven." 'My Father in heaven revealed it'; revealed what? "Thou art the Christ, the Son of the living God." What then? "Upon this rock I will build My church; and the gates of Hades shall not prevail against it." Can anything built upon Peter, even converted Peter, withstand the power of hell or death? It is Who Jesus Christ is, revealed from heaven, that is foundational to the Church, and "other foundation can no man lay" (1 Cor. 3:11).

"Ephesians" is tremendously contemporary, that is, up-to-date. In our time it is customary, practically instinctively, for Christians meeting for the first time to ask, or be asked, "what denomination, or mission, or society do you belong to?" Some such question is almost inevitable. The "Church"(?) is designated by a national, a doctrinal, a colour, a "State," a "Free," a personal name (e.g. Wesley, Luther, Calvin, Mennonite, etc., etc.) title. If the Apostle Paul were to step into Christendom today and be asked such a question as to "association," membership, he would open his eyes wide and look with pained astonishment and say, "Oh, brother, I have seen Jesus, the Son of God, and in seeing Him I have seen the Church, and in that only true Church there is not this mix-up of nationalities, colours, names, social or cultural differences and distinctions." "In Christ Jesus... there can be neither Greek nor Jew, there can be neither bond nor free, there can be no male and female; for ye are all one man in Christ Jesus" (Gal. 3:28). "...where there cannot be Greek and Jew, circumcision and uncircumcision, barbarian, Scythian, bondman, freeman; but Christ is all, and in all" (Col. 3:11). He would add, "there cannot be Paul, Apollos, Cephas, or any other name." The very least that such a seeing of Christ would do would be to revolutionize our phraseology, our manner of speaking.

A little incident might be to the point here. The writer heard it told by a well-known servant of God. In one of the Southern States of America the street cars were divided for "Coloured" and "White" travellers, and the rule of separation was strict. (This law no longer exists). A car was about to start from the stopping-point and the "coloured" section was quite full. The "white" also was full, but for one place. That place was next to a well-dressed and apparently well-to-do lady. An old, feeble and very poor coloured man hobbled to the car and begged the conductor to let him on because his son was seriously ill and he must get to him quickly. The conductor pushed the old man away, saying there was no room. The old man begged again to be allowed on, and was hardly treated by the conductor. The lady turned to the conductor and said, "Let him come and have this seat by me." The conductor objected, saying that it was against the law. But the lady insisted and enforced her wish. When the old man got off, another woman said indignantly to the lady, "Why did you allow that coloured man to come into our section?" The lady answered, "I am a servant of Jesus Christ, and my Master is colour-blind." A simple and touching story, but a profound exposition of the New Testament doctrine of The Body of Christ.

Paul's revelation of Christ is "there cannot be..." Not, "all these are in the Body as what they are on this earth." Given that all are truly born again and "baptized in one Spirit into one body," there is the foundation for gathering above the very real problems of the natural. Of course, there really is no other true Church. We remind you again of the very great place that Christ holds in Paul's very being and in his Letters, and, of course, this will determine everything.

How many things to which we give such importance would lose that importance and just recede from a first, or even secondary, place if truly we saw the Lord! What change in manner of speech and conduct would just happen without effort if we truly saw Him in the Spirit! Costly, yes costly. All true light costs. So the man in John nine found, but ask him whether he would exchange his new sight for the old acceptance. Read again Paul's evaluation of his revelation of Christ in Philippians three.

But let us insist and stress very strongly that, although Christ in all His fulness has been revealed and presented in the New Testament, that same New Testament makes it very clear that, through the Word and by the Holy Spirit, that objective presentation has to have a subjective counterpart in the heart--the spirit--of the believer. It will tell us that it was for this purpose that the Holy Spirit came; for this very purpose we have the indwelling Spirit. Paul earnestly prayed for already well-taught believers that they might be given a spirit of revelation in the full knowledge of Christ. This open-heaven endowment and given spiritual faculty is meant for all believers. But remember, the demand is for an absolutely pure and honest spirit and a preparedness to accept and go through with all that is involved. Here, the Cross, that is, Christ crucified, in its deepest application to self-interest in every form is the Rock of Offence, or the Chief Corner Stone; stumbling and falling or building and rising. Any pride, prejudice, or reserve will find us out sooner or later in that we shall have been side-tracked from the fullest intention of God in calling us. It will be a tragedy if, in the end, we are found to be in a "backwater," a cul-de-sac; perhaps snug and free from all the stresses of the battle, but--from heaven's standpoint--out! Such a possibility was an ever-present dread of Paul. "Lest, having heralded to others, I myself should be rejected;" and there is much more like that. "If by any means..." he says.

We must return to the great matter of the "Mystery," for there are things related thereto in our Letter which need clarifying. In all his Letters Paul uses this word some twenty times.

1. The mystery (secret) of the blindness which has happened to Israel. Rom. 11:25.

2. The mystery of the wisdom of God. 1 Cor. 2:7.
3. The mysteries of God. 1 Cor. 4:1.
4. The mysteries in speaking in tongues. 1 Cor. 14:2.
5. The mystery of the Rapture and change of body. 1 Cor. 15:51.
6. "The mystery of His will." Eph. 1:9.
7. The mystery made known to Paul. Eph. 3:3,4.
8. The fellowship of the mystery. Eph. 3:9.
9. The mystery of the union between Christ and the Church. Eph. 5:32.
10. The mystery of the Gospel. Eph. 6:19.
11. The mystery which hath been hid. Col. 1:26.
12. The mystery of Christ within or in the midst. Col. 1:27.
13. The mystery of God--Christ. Col. 2:2; 4:3.
14. The mystery of iniquity. 2 Thess. 2:7.
15. The mystery of the faith. 1 Tim. 3:9.
16. The mystery of Godliness. 1 Tim. 3:16.

(Some of the above are duplicated.)

It looks as though there are many mysteries, but if we look again we shall find that, at least in the majority of cases, the mystery relates--in some way--to Christ and the Church. There are very few exceptions to this, and when it comes to Paul's particular conception it is not in the plural, but "The mystery," and invariably it is connected with Christ personal and Christ corporate.

The next thing that we must take account of in this connection is Paul's particular viewpoint. It is from above. Five times in this Letter to the Ephesians he uses the phrase "in the heavenlies" (1:3,20; 2:6; 3:10; 6:12) and in that form it is found nowhere else. This is one of the most difficult of Paul's phrases for any of us to understand. We are not altogether helped by other phrases referring to heaven, such as "every knee should bow, of things in heaven..." (Phil. 2:10). The translation "in the heavenly places" is not too fortunate. But let us look at the various references.

1. The present realm and nature of the believer's blessings is in the heavenlies. 1:3.
2. Christ is now seated in the heavenlies "above all rule, and authority, and power, and dominion, and every name..." 1:20,21.
3. The position of Christ is said to be that also of the Church. 2:6.

4. There are principalities and powers in the heavenlies which are having made known unto them, through the Church, the manifold wisdom of God. 3:10.

5. The warfare of the Church is not now in the realm of flesh and blood, but in the heavenlies with principalities and powers, etc. 6:12.

Very well, then, what have we? Just this: there is a realm or sphere above and around the material, the sense and tangible realm, where spiritual interests are supreme, where rival spiritual activities go on. Great forces are at work in that realm, and they have a constitution, system or organization suitable to this purpose. It is a divided realm between celestial and demonic principalities. On the one side there is both interest in and co-operation with Christ's interests in the Church. On the other side there is not only bitter and relentless hostility to those interests, but an impact upon this world, "this darkness," which is intended to destroy both the people and the earth as the inheritance of God's Son. We know that natural elements above the earth have a powerful influence upon the physical life here. In the same way there are spiritual intelligences and forces which exert a tremendous influence upon the moral and spiritual life in this world. It is in this realm that Paul sees several things belonging to "the Mystery." One, that, amidst the strife, confusion and all that seems to the contrary, God is working out a "Purpose" which, because He is absolute Lord, will not just have to contend with adverse forces, but will both show His superiority and make the adverse forces serve the furtherance of that Purpose. This is the long view and the above view of the heavenlies.

Then, because Christ risen and exalted is "seated at God's right hand," He is in that position representatively and inclusively of the Church. The Church, therefore, is "seated together with Him in the heavenlies"; that is, in the present and ultimate good of His sovereignty.

Further, the blessings of believers are now, not as under the old economy, temporal, material, sentient, but "spiritual." "The riches of His grace"; "the riches of His inheritance"; "the riches of His glory"; "the unsearchable riches of Christ," etc.--these are all phrases in "Ephesians." These blessings are for a Church and its members who have--through union with Christ in His death and resurrection--been spiritually delivered and emancipated from "this present evil world" as the sphere of their natural life, ambition and resource, and whose hearts are "set on things above" (Col. 3:1-3). If you have really come into the good of such "riches," then you have proportionately come into the heavenlies. While we are right in mentally conceiving of "the heavenlies" as being a realm, we must not confine the idea to geography. Like "the Kingdom of Heaven," it is a sphere or realm in which spiritual factors, principles or laws and conditions obtain and take pre-eminence. That is why we used the word "proportionately." Geographically we are, or we are not, in a realm, a country; but spiritually we can be more or less in the nature, character and good of that realm. It is not a matter of definition of terms, but of spiritual accord, harmony, adjustment, agreement. In a time of great blessing we can just say, "It was as though we were in heaven." It is a spiritual position in oneness with spiritual realities. While it seems so difficult to explain, it is really only the fact and development of that which every truly born-again believer knows without explanation; namely, that something has happened by that new birth which has changed their consciousness of belonging and gravitation, so that a break has taken place in them with one realm and what belongs to it, and a union has come about with an entirely new realm and its content. They sense that they belong somewhere else and that there is a spirit in them which gravitates there and to those things. The New Testament has all the language and words for this, but it is the inward awareness that is the ground of learning the meaning. The development of that "law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus" (Rom. 8:2) by discipline--maybe trial and error--or triumph, is the way of the "transforming by the renewing (making

anew) of the mind" (Rom. 12:2). It is the Church's and the believer's normal course.

But we have not yet brought the present aspect of Paul's revelation into sufficiently clear relief. So as not to overload this chapter we will divide it, and continue in a separate one.

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