

THE IMPORTANCE OF THE NEW TESTAMENT MYSTERIES

Part XV

by Thomas Ice

*Let a man regard us in this manner, as servants of Christ, and stewards of the **mysteries** of God. In this case, moreover, it is required of stewards that one be found trustworthy.*

—1 Corinthians 4:1–2

The next use of the word “mystery” is found in 1 Corinthians 4:1, just a couple of chapters after Paul’s previous reference in 2:6. There is a connection between the two passages in that Paul was speaking about God’s revelation of His plan was revealed in a mystery in 2:6. In 4:1ff Paul is speaking about being a trustworthy steward of the mysteries of God. Gordon Fee notes: “This paragraph brings together two items from the preceding argument: the apostles as servants (3:5–9) and the coming judgment (3:13–15)”¹. When combined with chapter two, Paul is exhorting the priority of God’s Word as the basis for denoting proper behavior for believers, thus producing true unity in the church. This passage lays out the qualifications for an individual who is responsible for handling the Word of God, which is faithfulness and trustworthiness.

SERVANTS AND STEWARDS

Upon laying out a divine order in 3:21–23 which, states that the Corinthians “belong to Christ; and Christ belongs to God (3:23), Paul draws a logical conclusion from such an establishment in 4:1. The first word in the Greek text in verse one is *houtos*, which is translated “in this manner” in the *New American Standard Bible*. This Greek word links what follows with what has proceeded, which is the divine order in 3:23. Frederic Godet says, “it would connect this passage with the preceding, announcing a consequence drawn from it.”² The consequence is that as a servant and steward of Christ, we are to be faithful in the administration of His Word. This is logical outworking of Paul’s argument as noted by his use of *logizestho*, a word he often used in his epistles. A Greek lexicon says it means, “as a result of a calculation evaluate, estimate, look upon as, consider.”³ It is translated “regard” in this context. Based upon what has been said in Paul’s presentation up to that point, it logically follows that servants and stewards should handle their responsibilities a certain way. That way is about to be explained by Paul. John MacArthur concludes: “We have no right to use worldly criteria—such as popularity, personality, degrees, and numbers—to make the gospel seem more appealing. We should not try to make the world see God’s humble messengers as anything but what He has ordained them to be: servants of Christ, and stewards of the mysteries of God.”⁴

Paul identifies himself with two Greek terms *huperetes* and *oikonomos* translated as “servants” and “stewards.” Paul has been using the plural in 4:1, who is he referring to? In addition to himself it includes the other apostles and those who are servants and stewards, whoever they may be in the future. “Notice that Paul uses the plural in this verse to refer to the apostles and their helpers.”⁵ So what kind of people are responsible for handling the mysteries of God?

The Greek word *huperetes* is defined by MacArthur as follows: “means literally, “under rowers,” originally indicating the lowest galley slaves, the ones rowing on the bottom tier of a ship. They were the most menial, unenvied, and despised of slaves.

From that meaning the term came to refer to subordinates of any sort, to those under the authority of another.”⁶ David Garland expands on the use of this word:

Although the original meaning of (*hypēretēs*) might have referred to an “under-rower” in a war-galley, it came to mean an assistant, one who receives orders or directions claims, “The *hypēretēs* is distinguished from the *doulos*, always used for slave, by the fact that he is free and can in some cases claim a due reward for his services,” . . . He is a subordinate, bound to obey, but he labors as a free person, not as a slave. John (Mark), for example, is identified as the “assistant” of Paul and Barnabas in Acts 13:5. The terminology underlines the fact that ministers work under the orders of their master and have no significance except in relation to their master.⁷

The other Greek word *oikonomos* is a compound of two words: *oikos* meaning “house” and *nomos* meaning “law.” Thus, house law. Most English translations today usually translate it “steward.” However, it has been noted “today *steward* is too often associated with waiters on board ships, and translates *those entrusted with (secret things)*. The nearest equivalent today is *household manager, housekeeper*, or most broadly, especially in contemporary papyri, *estate manager*. This office normally included *responsibility for overseeing* a household budget, purchasing, accounts, resource allocation, collection of debts, and general running of the establishment, *but only as instructed* within guidelines agreed by the employer or the head of the house.⁸

Paul is stressing in this context of 1 Corinthians that he has no choice as an individual who is under Christ’s authority to represent Him in a manner consistent which His word to him. Paul has not other choice but to provide for them the unvarnished Word of God and apply it to their situation since he is under Christ’s authority and will one day be called on to give an account for such a responsibility. This is why he judges nothing before that day, as he says later in verses 3 and 4. His opinion does not count since he is a under Christ’s authority and under an obligation to represent Christ.

THE MYSTERIES OF GOD

Paul and those helping him are commissioned to properly handle “the mysteries of God.” Here Paul uses the plural for mystery. When I realize Paul uses this word “mystery” nineteen times in his epistles, which is a considerable number that he distributes through six of his thirteen letters. Mystery is a prevalent term employed by Paul when he is explaining God’s plan and purpose for the church. “Here he speaks of *mysteries in the plural*,” observes Ernest Campbell, “i.e., of the *many facets of the Mystery*. The Mystery is one great revealed secret of Truth for the Church which has many subtruths, and it is to these that Paul is referring in this verse (Eph. 3:10).”⁹ “The plural noun probably points in a similar direction to the reference to the (similarly plural) “deep things of God” in 2:10. The context (vv. 2–5) suggests that the “mysteries” have to do with the message Paul has shared with the Corinthians, certain points of which had resulted in his being judged by some of them.”¹⁰

The mysteries of God in this context appear to be a reference to the revelation of God’s plan for the church age. This is apparently clear in light of the preceding context where Paul speaks of the process of revelation from God to man (2:6–16). As I have noted previously in this series, the church age and the character of the church age, along with important aspects of the gospel itself are said to have always been part of God’s

plan or decree, however, the church age is also said to have been hidden from past ages and not revealed until it was primarily unveiled through the Apostle Paul (Rom. 16:25; Eph. 3:5; Col. 1:26).

FAITHFUL AND TRUSTWORTHY

Verse 2 proclaims the basis upon which a steward will one day be judged by Christ Himself, and that standard will be whether or not he is “trustworthy.” This verse transitions into Paul’s point about stewards with the phrase “in this case, moreover.” Heinrich Meyer translates it as follows: “*Such being the nature of our position as servants, the demand to be made upon the stewards of households of course takes effect.*”¹¹ Gordon Fee notes: “What is sought in ‘stewards’ is faithfulness, namely that they be trustworthy (in the primary sense of that word: ‘worthy of the trust that has been placed in their care’). Not eloquence, nor wisdom (nor ‘initiative,’ nor ‘success’—the more standard contemporary requirements), but faithfulness to the trust, is what God requires of his servants. For Paul this means absolute fidelity to the gospel as he received it and preached it (cf. 15:1–11).”¹²

Although this passage is focused upon Paul and his associates, because of the context that follows where Paul speaks of his appearance before the bema or the judgment seat of Christ. There is no doubt, however, that the same standard of faithfulness will be the basis by which all believers will be evaluated at the bema. Only God is able to evaluate the heart of an individual, as Paul notes in verse 3, “I do not even examine myself.” MacArthur applies the passage as follows: “A minister who does not study the Word cannot properly teach the Word. He cannot handle accurately that which he does not know. Under his care, as Milton observed, ‘The hungry sheep look up, and are not fed.’”¹³ Maranatha!

(To Be Continued . . .)

¹ Gordon D. Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, revised edition (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2014), p. 171.

² Frederic L. Godet, *Commentary on the First Epistle of St. Paul to the Corinthians*, (Grand Rapids: Kregel Publications, [1889] 1977), p. 204.

³ Frederick W. Danker, *A Greek-English lexicon of the New Testament and other early Christian Literature*, 3rd ed. (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2000), p. 597.

⁴ John F. MacArthur, Jr., *The MacArthur New Testament Commentary: 1 Corinthians* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1984), p. 96.

⁵ Simon J. Kistemaker, *Exposition of the First Epistle to the Corinthians* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1993), p. 128.

⁶ MacArthur, *1 Corinthians*, p. 96.

⁷ David E. Garland, *Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament: 1 Corinthians* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2003), p. 125.

⁸ Anthony C. Thiselton, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians: A Commentary on the Greek Text* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 2000), p. 336. (Italics original.)

⁹ Ernest R. Campbell, *A Commentary Of First Corinthians: Based On The Greek New Testament* (Silverton, OR: Canyonview Press, 1989), p. 67. (Italics original.)

¹⁰ Roy E. Ciampa and Brian S. Rosner, *The First Letter to the Corinthians* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing, 2010), p. 170.

¹¹ Heinrich August Wilhelm Meyer, *Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament, The Epistles to the Corinthians*, 2 vols. (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1879), Vol. I, p. 111.

¹² Gordon D. Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, revised edition (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2014), p. 175.

¹³ MacArthur, *1 Corinthians*, p. 99.