

THE IMPORTANCE OF THE NEW TESTAMENT MYSTERIES

Part XVI

by Thomas Ice

*And if I have the gift of prophecy, and know all **mysteries** and all knowledge; and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing.*

*For one who speaks in a tongue does not speak to men, but to God; for no one understands, but in his spirit he speaks **mysteries**.*

—1 Corinthians 13:2 & 14:2

Paul uses the word “mystery” in the plural twice in the section of 1 Corinthians where he deals with spiritual gifts (1 Cor. 12—14). This is a different context than any of the previous uses we have seen up to this point in our study. However, at first glance it appears the use of “mystery” in these passages is similar to the previous uses of the term.

Chapters 12 through 14 are dealing with what Paul calls “spiritual things” (1 Cor. 12:1). Here the word for spiritual is neuter with no direct object. Technically it should be translated “spiritual things,” but because of the context, those spiritual things are properly seen as “spiritual gifts.” Commentator Ernest Campbell explains: “It may also be rendered *spiritual things*, i. e., things which are spiritual in contrast to that which is soulish or physical (15:44). Thus we observe, Paul is speaking about things in the spiritual sphere, and in this verse, spiritual gifts.”¹

The reader sees the same contrast between true, genuine revelation from God and the attempt at co-mingling their pagan heritage with the things of God as was noted in 1 Corinthians 2. Paul notes in verse 2: “You know that when you were pagans, you were led astray to the dumb idols, however you were led.” In the past they worshipped gods who were mute and could not speak. As believers in Christ they followed a God who speaks true revelation. “Since the Corinthians had a background of ecstatic (and so-called ‘spiritual’) religion,” observes Wayne House, “the apostle felt it necessary to instruct them that the spirituals of which he would be writing were not of the same class.”² House concludes the following concerning 1 Corinthians 12:

Corinth was experience-oriented and self-oriented. Mystery religions and other pagan cults were in great abundance, from which cults many of the members at the Corinthian church received their initial religious instruction. After being converted they had failed to free themselves from pagan attitudes and they confused the true work of the Spirit of God with the former pneumatic and ecstatic experiences of the pagan religions, especially the Dionysian mystery or the religion of Apollo.”³

1 CORINTHIANS 13:2

1 Corinthians 13 is the famous love chapter of the Bible. Because the Corinthians were so self-oriented and thus experience-oriented, Paul explains what love looks like in the middle of his discussion of spiritual things. Paul defines love as others-oriented, which conflicted with the self-orientation of the Corinthian worldview before they were saved. If the Corinthians would practice love, which is others-oriented rather than self-

oriented, then it would cure their mixing of their pagan past with their newfound Christianity.

In the process of his love treaties Paul makes use of the word mystery for the third time in this epistle, this time in the plural. Spiros Zodhiates explains how mysteries is used in this context:

In New Testament usage, in particular, a mystery (in Greek *musteerion*) is a secret know only to God, that is, a secret thought, plan, or dispensation of God. Ordinarily these mysteries are hidden from human reason; hence it follows that under extraordinary circumstances, when men do understand these secrets, it is because God, who alone originally knew them and understood them, condescended to reveal them to the men who are His chosen instruments to reveal these secrets to others.⁴

Paul's use of mysteries in this passage is in keeping with his previous uses in 1 Corinthians and his other epistles relating to the hidden plan of God. In this passage Paul speaks of an unrealistic hypothetical situation, where even if an individual were to know all the mysteries that have ever existed, which is totally impossible, if he does not have love then he is nothing. Paul's reference to "the mysteries of God" are in contrast to the pagan idea of mysteries that were supposedly received from idols that could not speak.

1 CORINTHIANS 14:2

Once again Paul uses the plural term "mysteries" in 1 Corinthians 14:2. In this context Paul has just finished the "love chapter" of 1 Corinthians 13. This is because he understood the Corinthian use of tongues or languages to be a residue of their pervious pagan practices. It appears to me that at the beginning of chapter 14 Paul is separating true, biblical spirituality from the Corinthians past pagan practices. Therefore, I think Paul is rebuking the Corinthian church for substituting a pseudo-spirituality for a real Holy Spirit sourced spirituality, which the Apostle noted is not selfish but others oriented (1 Cor. 13). This is why I believe it is in this passage that "mysteries" is used differently than in all other New Testament passages. It is the only time in the New Testament "mystery" is used this way. John MacArthur explains: "The carnal Corinthians, however, were much more interested in the sophisticated than the simple, in the mysterious rather than the edifying. They did not care that **no one understands**, or literally, 'no one hears.' Their concern was for the excitement and self-gratification of speaking **mysteries** in the **spirit**. They did not care that the mysteries had no meaning to themselves or to anyone else."⁵

The leading Greek lexicon says this use of mysteries means the following: "*utters secret truths in the Spirit* which the person alone shares with God, and which others, even Christians, do not understand."⁶ MacArthur further expounds when he says, "The **mysteries** Paul has in mind here are of the type associated with the pagan mystery religions, out of which many of the Corinthian Christians had come. Unlike the mysteries of the gospel, which are revelations of things previously hidden (Matt. 13:11; Eph. 3:9; etc.), the pagan mysteries intentionally remained mysterious, as unknown truths and principles that supposedly only the initiated elite were privileged to know.⁷ Wayne House further explains:

The term *mystery* is used in the New Testament but with a different force (except for possibly 1 Cor. 14:2). Hay clarifies the difference between these two uses.

In the New Testament it refers to the things of God that could not be known by man except through revelation from God. The revelation given of these things by the Holy Spirit is not obscure but clear and is given to be communication to God's people (1 Cor. 2:1–16). It is not given privately in unknown words. In heathen religions this word referred to the hidden secrets of the gods which only the initiated could know. Those initiated into such mysteries claimed to have contact with the spirit world through emotional excitement, revelations, the working of miracles and the speaking of unknown words revealed by the spirits. In the New Testament Church every Christian is initiated.⁸

Possibly Paul spoke of these mysteries when he wrote that “one who speaks in a tongue . . . speaks mysteries” (1 Cor. 14:2). If this is not an allusion to mystery terminology, it is certainly not a commendation from the apostle.⁹

Still other commentators provide further insight when they say:

It suggests moments of ecstasy experienced in heathen religion, when a human being is (or is believed to be) possessed by a supernatural; . . . speaking of the power of love, says, A sort of god (*daimon*) carries us away (*agei*) wherever he wills, and it is impossible to resist him . . . Paul himself in this verse appears to think of demons as ravishing those who take part in heathen worship; compare x. 20. The idols themselves are lifeless—*dumb*, unable to give an answer to prayers addressed to them.¹⁰

Charles Ellicott agrees and notes, “there is a plain reference to the agency of the devil, whether directly, or as manifested in the flesh (Gal. v. 17).”¹¹

CONCLUSION

We see in these two passages one that uses “mystery” in the same way all the other references in the New Testament use it (1 Cor. 13:2) and one that uses it in reference to utterances that are unknown and thus “mysteries” that cannot be understood (1 Cor. 14:2). Knowing all mysteries in 1 Corinthians 13:2 relates to the normal way Paul uses mystery, since the only way a human individual could know all mysteries is through revelation from God, Who indeed knows all things. However, on the other hand, because Paul was dealing with the Corinthians and the fact they were bringing over from paganism a spirituality in which they would work themselves up into an emotional state of ecstasy and claim ecstatic utterances were Holy Spirit inspired gifts of speaking in languages they had not learned, we have the only nuance of mysteries as used by pre-Christian pagans. Maranatha!

(To Be Continued . . .)

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- ¹ Ernest R. Campbell, *A Commentary Of First Corinthians: Based On The Greek New Testament* (Silverton, OR: Canyonview Press, 1989), p. 193. (Italics original)
- ² H. Wayne House, "Tongues and the Mystery Religion of Corinth," *Bibliotheca Sacra* (Vol. 140, Num. 558; April–June 1983), p. 145.
- ³ House, "Tongues," pp. 147–48.
- ⁴ Spiros Zodhiates, *To Love is to Live: An Exegetical Commentary on 1 Corinthians 13* (Chattanooga, TN: AMG Publishers, 1967), p. 34.
- ⁵ John MacArthur, *1 Corinthians* (Chicago: Moody Press 1984), p. 372. (Emphasis original)
- ⁶ 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. 662.
- ⁷ MacArthur, *1 Corinthians*, p. 372. (Emphasis original)
- ⁸ Alexander Rattray Hay, *What is Wrong in the Church? Vol. 2. Counterfeit Speaking in Tongues* (Audubon, NJ: New Testament Missionary Union, n.d.), p. 26.
- ⁹ House, "Tongues and the Mystery," pp. 140–41. (Italics original)
- ¹⁰ C. K. Barrett, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians* (New York: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1968), pp. 278–79.
- ¹¹ Charles J. Ellicott, *St Paul's First Epistle to the Corinthians: With a Critical and Grammatical Commentary* (London: Longmans, Green, and Company, 1887), p. 227.