

THE MYSTERIES OF GOD

Hugo Bouter

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The revelation of the secrets of God's heart in the New Testament



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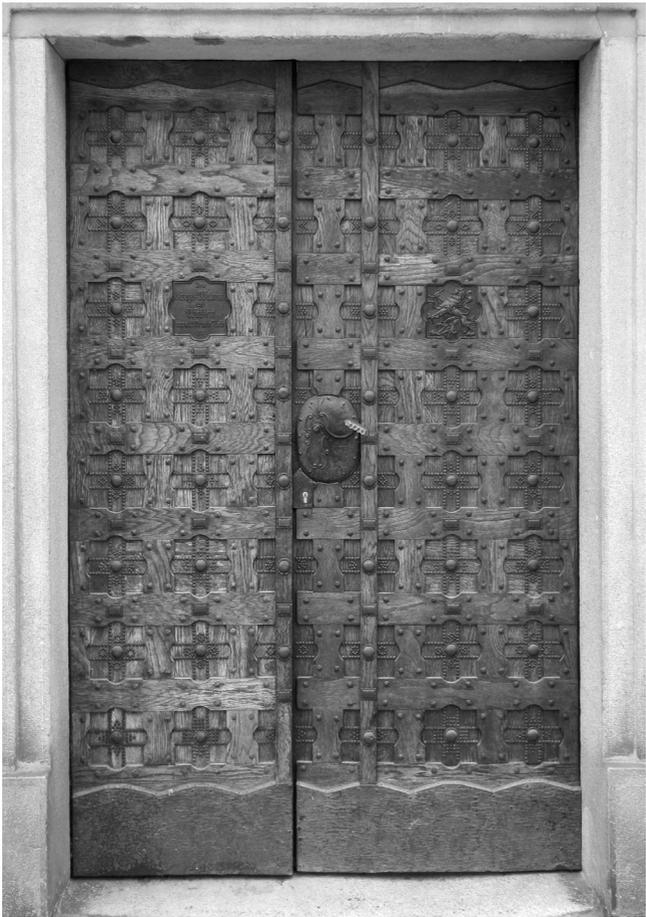
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'But we speak the wisdom of God in a mystery, the hidden wisdom which God ordained before the ages for our glory'.

'Let a man so consider us, as servants of Christ and stewards of the mysteries of God'.

1 Corinthians 2:7, 10; 4:1



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Introduction

In this booklet we want to look especially at those New Testament mysteries, or hidden things, that relate to the Church or the Assembly of God. Through the Word of God the Holy Spirit has revealed the deep things of God, the things that filled His heart before the foundation of the world. The great subject of these things is Christ and His Church. From all eternity, God was occupied with His beloved Son and His heavenly bride. Now, the Holy Spirit, who came down after Christ had been glorified at God's right hand, has inspired the apostles to reveal the hidden things of God, the secrets of His heart. In His infinite grace, we have now been acquainted with His deepest thoughts in the writings of the New Testament.

No wonder these things are called mysteries, for they were never revealed in the Old Testament. The truths relating to Christ and the Church, as being His body and His bride, have now been revealed by the Spirit to His holy apostles and prophets (Eph. 3:5). But there might be a second reason why the New Testament puts an emphasis on their hidden character. For these matters can only be known by faith, their glory is not yet visible. But when Christ appears in glory with His own, the full extent of God's counsels will be manifested (2 Thess. 1:6-10; Rev. 19).

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H. Bouter

1. The mystery of God's will

Christ is the great Center of God's thoughts and counsels. God has exalted Him to be Head over all things, and He has subjected all things to Him (Eph. 1:10, 22). The first man, Adam, failed. But God has found His delight in the second Man and has seated Him at His right hand in heaven. His name will be prominent in heaven and on earth, but today this is still a mystery. The supremacy of Christ will be manifested in a coming day: 'But now we do not yet see all things put under Him'. And the writer continues: 'But we see Jesus, who was made a little lower than the angels, for the suffering of death crowned with glory and honor'. He is waiting at God's right hand, till His enemies will be made His footstool (Heb. 1:13; 2:5-9).

But God has revealed this mystery of His will to His own, for the Church will share with Christ in His dominion over all things. The Church of the living God is His body, and one with Him who is the Head of the new creation. The Church is inseparably united with Christ. He will not rule over her, but she will rule with Him over all things.

Therefore believers are heirs of all His possessions, they are joint heirs with Christ (Rom. 8:17). For this reason God acquaints the co-heirs with what He has given to His Son, the Heir: 'And He put all things under His feet, and gave Him to be Head over all things to the church, which is His body, the fullness of Him who fills all in all' (Eph. 1:9-12; 22-23).

2. The mystery of godliness

The revelation of our Lord Jesus Christ and His glorification in heaven is also the heart of this divine mystery, as we read in First Timothy: 'And without controversy great is the mystery of godliness:

God was manifested in the flesh,
Justified in the Spirit,
Seen by angels,
Preached among the Gentiles,
Believed on in the world,
Received up in glory' (1 Tim. 3:16).

We see here that this mystery relates to the truth of the house of God (v. 15). In order to make it possible for the Church of God to be the pillar and ground of the truth, Christ must have the place that is due to Him. He is the great Center of the testimony that flows from God's house. His Person and His work must be present in the hearts of the believers and in their service of God, for the mystery of the faith must be held with a pure conscience (1 Tim. 3:9). Only when Christ is magnified by believers does it become visible Who God really is and where He dwells.

Christ is the Center of the heavenly truth that is proclaimed by the Church of God. Both His divinity and His Manhood, united as they are in one Person, are acknowledged and admired by faith. God has been manifested in the flesh. The Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we beheld His glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father, full of grace and truth (John 1:14). He is the second Man, the last Adam, the Lord from heaven (1 Cor. 15:45, 47). And the Holy Spirit

acknowledged and sealed His perfect humanity: 'Justified in the Spirit'. The angels admired Him too and they served Him, for they saw God's wondrous wisdom in Him: 'Seen by angels'. The grace of God was revealed by Him to a lost world, and the message of salvation was preached among the Gentiles. It was not limited to the Jews, the people of God. And so He became the Object of faith in the whole world, after He had been glorified in heaven: 'Received up in glory'. One day He will return to assume His Messianic reign here on earth, but meanwhile we are united with the Lord in heaven. He is the Head of His body, the Church.

3. The mystery of Christ and the Church

The Lord has also entrusted the preaching of the mystery of the Church to the apostle Paul. Christ called him from heaven, when he was on his way to Damascus (Acts 9). Paul did not know Him according to the flesh like the other apostles, he met Jesus while persecuting the saints. So he learned to know Him as the glorified Lord, the One who has a body here on earth, of which He is the Head in heaven. The individual members of this body are the believers from among the Jews and the Gentiles. We have been united by the bond of the Spirit into one body, and we are also united with the Lord Jesus, the Head of the body (1 Cor. 12:12-14; Eph. 4:1-16; Col. 1:18).

Silence was kept as to this mystery in the times of the ages, but it has now been made manifest, and by prophetic Scriptures made known for obedience of faith to all the nations (Rom. 16:25-26). Through special revelation Paul had learned this mystery, 'which in other generations had not been made known to the sons of men, as it has now been revealed to His holy apostles and prophets'. And he brought to light what is the administration of the mystery hidden throughout the ages in God (Eph. 3:2-12). This mystery, which deals with Christ and the Church, is great (Eph. 5:32).

The revelation of this mystery signals even the completion of the Word of God (Col. 1:25). It was hidden from ages and from generations, but has now been made manifest to the saints; to whom God would make known what are the riches of the glory of this mystery among the Gentiles: which is Christ in you, the hope of glory (Col. 1:27). In Colossians the emphasis is on Christ Himself as being the essence of

the mystery. In chapter 4 the apostle asks for prayer for announcing the mystery of *Christ* (Col. 4:3). But at the same time it is the mystery of *God* (Col. 2:2). For God the Father is its origin, and it was hidden in Him from all ages (Eph. 3:9).

In the letter to the Ephesians the accent is more on the Church itself as the contents of the mystery. Its special place as the one body, the one new man, and the union with Christ as the Head in heaven, is the subject here. In Colossians the body is mentioned too, but it focuses all attention on the *Head*. Christ is the Head of the body, the Church, and we are called to hold fast to the Head (Col. 1:18; 2:19). In Romans 12 and in 1 Corinthians 12 Paul also speaks extensively about the Church as the body of Christ. There is only one body, for by one Spirit we were all baptized into one body. And all believers in a certain place form the local expression of the body: 'Now you are the body of Christ, and members individually' (1 Cor. 12:27).

We would also like to point out that the Lord's supper is the means whereby the oneness of the body is practically experienced. It is remarkable that only Paul mentions this in First Corinthians. The one loaf speaks of the one body. 'The bread which we break, is it not the communion of the body of Christ? For we, being many, are one bread and one body; for we all partake of that one bread' (1 Cor. 10:16-17). By eating of the bread, I proclaim to be a member of the body. The bread reminds us of our blessed Lord Himself, who went into death and gave His life for us.

But it is also a symbol of the mystical body, of which Christ is the risen Head, after it has been formed by the Spirit on the day of Pentecost.



4. The mystery of the Rapture

The apostle Paul spoke about the character of the Church in the present age, but also about its glorious future. He was used by the Spirit of God to declare to us the whole counsel of God (Acts 20:27).

The Church will be completed in two stages:

- the resurrection of the departed saints will take place first;
- then the saints who are still alive will be changed in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye.

We shall be caught up together in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air. And thus we shall always be with the Lord (1 Cor. 15:51-52; 1 Thess. 4:15-18). Both groups will be made conformable to their risen Lord and be united with Him in glory.

The union of the Lord with His own, which now is a clear spiritual reality, will then be fully seen. 'For our citizenship is in heaven, from which we also eagerly wait for the Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ, who will transform our lowly body that it may be conformed to His glorious body' (Phil. 3:20-21).

5. The mystery of lawlessness

In the meantime there have been negative developments in the professing Church, an increase in lawlessness and disobedience to the revealed Word of God. This is confirmed by the letters of the risen Lord to the seven churches in Revelation 2 and 3. And it is also called a mystery in Revelation 1:20, namely the mystery of the seven stars and the seven lampstands.

‘For the mystery of lawlessness is already at work’, we are told by the apostle Paul in his second letter to the Thessalonians (2 Thess. 2:1-12). In the last days there will follow a great apostasy, a general falling away, culminating in the revelation of the man of sin, the lawless one, or the antichrist, who will sit as God in the temple of God. He will proclaim himself as God and will accept the worship of his followers (John 5:43; 1 John 2:22). The One who now restrains the lawlessness and the revelation of the man of sin, is the Holy Spirit and He will restrain the full growth of evil until He is taken out of the way, together with the glorified Church at Christ’s coming (1 Thess. 4:13-18).

The ruin of the Church can only be observed when we look at it in its failure as the Lord’s witness here on earth, as the house of God (1 and 2 Timothy). For as the body of Christ it is not subject to failure and ruin. We are complete in Him, our Head in heaven. But it is our responsibility to hold fast to the Head and follow the guidance of the Spirit into all truth, and here it is where human failure comes in. The Church has failed in its testimony. The house of God has become like a great house with vessels for honor and some for dishonor (2 Tim. 2). There are builders

who have built with wood, hay and straw on the firm foundation that has been laid (1 Cor. 3).

6. Kingdom mysteries, and the mystery of Babylon the great

In the parables of the kingdom, the Lord describes the results of His preaching and of His ministry among God's people. He has been rejected as the promised King by Israel, and He is now active as a Sower of the Word. He continues this work from heaven through His servants, the apostles and other workers. The wicked one, however, also started sowing, causing the kingdom to become a mixture of good and evil until the moment of Christ's return. Then He Himself will pass judgment at the time of harvest.

In the third parable (the mustard seed) we see that the kingdom in its present form would become a great power on the earth. And in the fourth parable (the leaven) we are told that it would be characterized by inward corruption. The birds of the air picture unclean spirits, and the leaven speaks of moral and doctrinal evil (Matt. 13:31-33; 1 Cor. 5:6-8; Gal. 5:9).

In the last three parables we find what is of special value within the kingdom. The treasure in the field and the pearl of great price portray the remnant of Israel and the Church of the living God, which the Lord has obtained for Himself with the price of His precious blood. The last parable (the dragnet) shows the work of the fishermen in the last days. The labor of the preachers will result in the gathering of the good fish in vessels, in local testimonies. This contrasts with the work of the angels, who will remove the wicked from among the just at the end of the age (Matt. 13:47-52).

There is a parallel between this chapter and Revelation 2 and 3. The downward course begins when believers have left their first love (Ephesus). It ends when Christ will spew the lukewarm church (Laodicea) out of His mouth. It is certainly remarkable that the fourth parable of Matthew 13 and the fourth letter in the book of Revelation describe the negative results of the activities of a woman. Instead of being a new lump before God (1 Cor. 5:7), all is leavened by the teaching of this false prophetess (Matt. 13:33; Rev. 2:20). Rather than devoting itself to Christ, the corrupt church of Thyatira joins itself to an evil world and is characterized by idolatry.

The full result of this is seen in the last mystery referred to in the book of Revelation, that of Babylon the great (Rev. 17-18). The description of the woman and of the beast that carries her is self-explanatory: 'And on her forehead a name was written: Mystery, Babylon the great, the mother of harlots and of the abominations of the earth'. And when John saw her, he marveled with great amazement (Rev. 17:5-7). Revelation 17 portrays the religious and political character of the false Church, Revelation 18 shows its economic power. Then in contrast with this we find the true Church, the bride of the Lamb, who appears with Christ in glory after the marriage supper has taken place in heaven (Rev. 19-22).

7. The mystery of Israel's restoration

The failure of the Christian testimony down through the ages prepares the way, in God's governmental dealings, for Israel's restoration. This mystery has also been entrusted to the apostle Paul, as he writes to the Romans: 'For I do not desire, brethren, that you should be ignorant of this mystery, lest you should be wise in your own opinion, that hardening in part has happened to Israel until the fullness of the Gentiles has come in. And so all Israel will be saved, as it is written: The Deliverer will come out of Zion, and He will turn away ungodliness from Jacob' (Rom. 11:25-26; Isa. 59:20-21).

Romans 11 also shows that in the present time a remnant from Israel has been added to the Church (v. 5), which is composed of believers both from Israel and the nations. It is seen here as God's testimony on the earth, the olive tree of which Abraham – or the promise of blessing to Abraham – is the root. In Christ the blessings of Abraham have come to all true believers, who share his faith in the living God and have been justified by faith (Rom. 4; Gal. 3). The believers from the Gentiles were grafted in among the branches and they stand by faith. But the natural branches will be grafted into the tree again, if they do not continue in unbelief.

But divine judgment will fall on all unbelievers, both from Israel and from the Gentiles. The apostate part of Israel, that shall follow the antichrist, shall be punished with everlasting destruction from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of His power, when he comes, in that Day, to be glorified in His saints and to be admired among all those who believe

(2 Thess. 1 and 2). And as we have already seen, the apostate Church will be judged and burned with fire (Rev. 18:8-24).

Then the time has come for Christ to appear in glory with His true bride, executing judgment upon all His enemies and saving His earthly people Israel. Christ and the glorified Church will be the center of the heavenly glory. In connection with the earth it will be manifested as the New Jerusalem that will lighten the world (Rev. 21:9-22:5). It is remarkable that there is no mention that the heavenly Jerusalem will arrive on the earth. Just the dimensions of the city show this to be impossible, for it has a length, width and height of over 2000 kilometers. The heavenly city will remain the center of the manifested glory that will shine from heaven, and the nations shall walk in its light. But restored Israel will be the center of all earthly glory, just as the prophets announced it.

Thus everything is in balance. Christ and the Church will reign from heaven; that is the heavenly part of the kingdom. We shall see heaven open, and the angels of God ascending and descending upon the Son of Man (John 1:51). As the Messiah of Israel He will recognize His earthly people, now reborn and renewed, and He will exercise His rule from Jerusalem over all the earth. There will be a new city, and a new temple. It shall come to pass that the mountain of the Lord's house shall be established on the top of the mountains, and shall be exalted above the hills; and all nations shall flow to it (Isa. 2 and 4; Ezek. 40-48). Then the mystery of God will be fulfilled, and Christ will be Head over all things in heaven and on the earth.

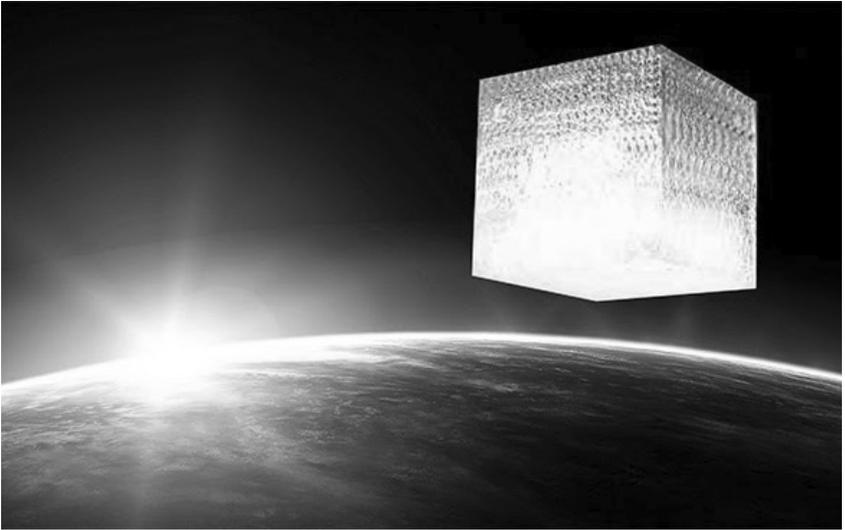


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