

The Mystery of Christ and Cosmic Restoration

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In Ephesians 1:9-10 Paul speaks about the mystery of cosmic restoration, the reunion of heaven and earth under Christ. He pictures this as the restoration of a once disjointed body that is brought together with each part in its proper place under its head.

All too often Christians confuse mysteries with secrets.¹ So, when they explain the Christian faith and commend it to others, they, knowingly or unknowingly, explain it away. They seem to assume that the mystery of Christ is a cognitive matter, something that is unknown for want of information about him or understanding of him. But a mystery is not the same thing as a secret. Even though both have to do with something that is hidden and unknown, a mystery differs from a secret in one important respect. A secret remains a secret only as long as it is still unknown. Once it is revealed it ceases to be a secret, because a secret exists only as long as information is withheld or the facts are unknown. But a mystery remains a mystery even when it is revealed, because it needs to be experienced to be known. In fact, the more you know about it, the more mysterious it becomes.² Think of the mystery of life or of love!

¹ See the frequent translation of mystery as “secret” in the NIV (Matt 13:11; Mark 4:11; Luke 8:10; 1 Cor 2:7; 4:1; 2 Thess 2:7). The New Testament does not use this term for things that have been deliberately kept secret or for what is experienced by higher states of human consciousness, but for the unseen presence and work of the invisible God in the world.

² Mystery is commonly defined as that which goes beyond normal human comprehension, like the perception of ultra-violet light to human eyesight. The implication is that if humans were more perceptive and intelligent, they

You may be able to explain a mystery, but you can never explain it away. It remains a mystery no matter how much you know about it or how fully you experience it.³

In the ancient world the caretakers of a holy place, a site or the shrine that was dedicated to a god or goddess, were sometimes called mystagogues. They were the stewards of a god's house. Their task was to show the devotees of that deity around the holy place. As they did so they told the stories of the local god, the myths that were associated with the place. Those stories explained the nature of the deity that was present there and the rituals that were associated with worship of that deity. In this way they initiated people into the mystery of that god. They revealed what was hidden from human sight but experienced by those who were involved in the cult of that god. A mystagogue who had been initiated into the mystery "led" (*agō* in Greek) others together with himself into that mystery. In classical Greek "mystagogy" was the term for the initiation of people into the experience of a mystery.⁴

would be able to discern it clearly and understand it fully. In contrast to this view the writers of New Testament do not just use this term for that which is beyond normal human understanding, but for that which is hidden from all human perception and knowledge, no matter how acute and refined, like the real presence of Christ's body and blood in the Eucharist. It deals with what is unseen because it is not temporal but eternal (2 Cor 4:18). The mystery of the Christian faith has to do with what Luther calls "the theology of the cross", God hidden and revealed in what is contrary to him, the human nature, weakness, suffering, and folly of the incarnate, crucified and yet exalted Son of God ("Heidelberg Disputation," *Luther's Works* 31, edited and translated by Harold J. Grimm, Muhlenberg Press: Philadelphia, 1957, 52-54.

³ The Greek word *mystērion* is derived from a verb *muō* that means to walk about with shut eyes. Mystery therefore has to do with the experience of unseen, non-empirical realities.

⁴ In the ancient world the term mystagogy was also used in a much more specialized way for initiation into the so-called mystery cults, such as the cult of Demeter at Eleusis, the cult of Isis in Egypt, and the oriental cult of Mithras which spread out over the Roman empire. In my opinion the best account of these cults is given by Walter Burkert in *Ancient Mystery Cults* (Harvard University Press: Cambridge, Massachusetts and London, 1987).

My basic contention is that all pastors, all teachers of the Christian faith, are mystagogues.⁵ Their task is to initiate people into a wonderful mystery that seems too good to be true, a mystery that evades human grasp and amazes the imagination. Our faith deals with invisible realities (Heb 11:1; cf. 2 Cor 4:18), things that are hidden from human sight, gifts from God that no eye has ever seen, no ear has ever heard, and no human mind has ever conceived (1 Cor 2:9). The core of that mystery is the **presence** of the crucified and risen Lord Jesus in the church and its access to the heavenly realm through him in the divine service.

Yet it goes beyond what happens in the divine service, for it embraces the whole history of the world and the whole of our physical lives as we journey with Christ from earth to heaven. It, in fact, embraces the whole creation. What Jesus has accomplished for us and given to us will remain a mystery until his visible reappearance on the last day. Only then will all that is now hidden be disclosed for all to see. Then the full spiritual depth and entire cosmic extent of that mystery will be revealed.

Some years ago an Australian social researcher Hugh Mackay wrote an article for the newspaper, the Australian, in which he summarised the results of the research that he had done on the attitudes of the so-called Generation Y. He noted that it is the most intensely tribal group of young people in living memory. For me the most interesting finding from his research was his claim that this generation was fascinated by three things - community, imagination, and mystery. If that is so, the church should be well placed to commend the Christian faith to them. That, at least, is my contention. Yet, sadly, it seems that, to

⁵ For a discussion of pastors as stewards of divine mysteries see Jonathan F. Grothe, "The Mysteries and the Ministry" and Charles R. Hogg, Jr., "The Mystery of Pastoral Existence." Pages 55-65 and 101-13 in Paul T. McCain and John R. Stephenson (eds.), *Mysteria Dei: Essays in Honor of Kurt Marquart*, Concordia Theological Seminary Press: Fort Wayne, 2000.

meet the challenge of the modern world, the Lutheran church may have, all too often, inadvertently misrepresented the faith by rationalising it and explaining it away. I maintain that Christian preachers and teachers should, instead, treat the faith as a mystery and seek to be good mystagogues in the way that they commend it to others, not as a private esoteric experience, like an hallucinogenic trip with drugs, but as a communal, liturgical manifestation.⁶

Those people, who have been steeped in the tenets of post-modernism, have an inbuilt suspicion of abstract thought and universal theories. They reject general explanations in favour of subjective experience and their own interpretation of it. Yet at the same time many of them hanker after some assurance that their experiences are grounded in reality, unlike a drug-induced hallucination, and therefore able to be shared with others in common discourse. The church may therefore be able to use the concept and reality of mystery to commend the Christian faith to them.

Mystery is a term that is well suited to describe the common personal experience of the spiritual realm that surrounds and pervades the sensible material realm, like a fifth dimension. It assumes that there is more to human life on earth than is evident to the five senses, something beyond normal sense experience that integrates it and helps to make sense of it. The mystery of the Christian faith has to do with the hidden presence of Christ with us here on earth and our restoration by his restoration of all creation. It is a commonly shared experience of faith in him. It does not supply a theory that is able to explain everything, but

⁶ There is much that can be learnt from the early Christian practice of mystagogy in preparing candidates for baptism and their initiation into the divine service through liturgical catechesis as explored by Edward Yarnold in *The Awe-Inspiring Rites of Initiation: The Origins of the R.C.I.A* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1994). In this book he outlines the stages of initiation and then publishes four sets of mystagogical homilies from the fourth century AD.

provides a vision of life that helps people appreciate their unique location in God's creation, a vision of reality that is both subjective and objective, inward and outward, mental and physical, heavenly and earthly, devotional and liturgical, personal and cosmic, the vision of the incarnate Christ in whom the fullness of the godhead dwells bodily and in whom we too are fulfilled (Col 2:9).

In this paper I aim to summarize the teaching of the New Testament on the mystery of Christ and our participation in that mystery. I will not deal with the matter systematically⁷ or comprehensively⁸, but only intend to examine what can be ascertained about it by an analysis of the use of the term *mystêrion*⁹ in the gospels¹⁰ and in the Pauline epistles.¹¹ This

⁷ The most significant Lutheran theological treatment of this theme in English comes from Wilhelm Stählin in *The Mystery of God: The Presence of God with Men*, which was published in German by Johannes Stauda: Kassel-Wilhelmshohe in 1936, translated by R. Bird Hoyle for publication by SCM: London in 1937, and republished by Concordia Publishing House: Saint Louis in 1964. Stählin (1883-1975), the bishop of Oldenburg and then professor in theology at the University of Münster, was a leader in the influential high church Berneuchen liturgical movement between the wars. He uses Luther's formula "in, with, and under" for the presence of Christ's body and blood in the sacrament to reflect systematically on God's presence in the divine service. While there is still much that is good in this work, it suffers from poor translation, its cursory treatment of the scriptural foundations for its assertions, its neglect of dogma as normative for liturgy, and its lack of emphasis on the role of written word of God in the liturgical disclosure of the divine mystery.

⁸ Note the use of this term in the Revelation of St John for the seven lamps as seven churches with the risen Lord Jesus as the lampstand (1:20), the fulfilment of prophecy by the reign of Jesus as the Messiah (10:7), and the identity of Mother Babylon (17:5, 7). For an analysis of this usage see Louis A. Brighton, *Revelation*, Concordia Commentary, Concordia Publishing House: St Louis, 1999, 269-70, 443-44.

⁹ Until the second half of the twentieth century it was fashionable to assume that Paul and the evangelists borrowed this term from the pagan Hellenistic mystery religions. In his careful study of "*mystêrion, mueō*", G. Bornkamm has argued that this is most unlikely (*Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, vol. IV, edited by G. Kittel, translated by G. Bromiley,

study is presented as a tribute to my dear friend and fellow Old Testament scholar Dean Wenthe whom I first met when I was expounding the mystery of the divine service in a Bible study on Hebrews. It is just a small token of gratitude to him for his generous hospitality and warm encouragement of me as a scholar, gratitude too for his immense contribution to the world-wide cause of confessional Lutheranism as the president of Concordia Theological Seminary and as a passionate teacher of Christ's incarnate presence in the divine service.

1. The Mystery of God's Kingdom

While the theme of Christ's teaching as the revelation of a mystery is implicit in all the gospels, Christ himself uses this term only once in his explanation of the Parable of the Sower (Mark 4:11; cf. Matt 13:11; Luke 8:10). After Jesus had taught this parable to the crowd, the Twelve Apostles and his other disciples asked him about his use of parables. Before he explained the Parable of the Sower, he remarked that the mystery of God's kingdom had been given only to them; it was inaccessible to those who are outside his circle of disciples, even though they saw him and heard what he said. His parables were utterly opaque to them because they were still outside God's kingdom.

Eerdmans: Grand Rapids, 1967, 802-28). He shows that it was first used in the LXX to translate the Aramaic term *râz* in Dan 2:18, 19, 27, 28, 29, 30, 47. There it refers to "an eschatological mystery, a concealed intimation of divinely ordained future events whose disclosure and interpretation is reserved for God alone and for those inspired by His Spirit" (814-15). It was then used in a similar sense in Jewish apocalyptic and Rabbinic literature. His findings have been confirmed by Raymond E. Brown (*The Semitic Background of the Term "Mystery" in the New Testament*, Facet Books, Biblical Series 21, Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1968).

¹⁰ Mark 4:11; Matt 13:11; Luke 8:10.

¹¹ See Rom 11:25; 16:25; 1 Cor 2:1(?),7; 4:1; 13:2; 14:2; 15:51; Eph 1:9; 3:3, 4, 9; 5:32; 6:19; Col 1:26, 27; 2:2; 4:3; 2 Thess 2:7; 1 Tim 3:9, 16.

In Mark's gospel Jesus has five main things to say about the mystery of God's kingdom, His eventual rule over the whole of His creation. First, God's good and gracious rule on earth is concealed from human sight and yet revealed in Jesus the Messiah. The man Jesus embodies the mystery of God's kingdom. He ushers in God's kingdom, mysteriously, by his incarnation, teaching, and sacrificial death. Like his identity as God's Son, the Messiah, his kingdom is not apparent to the human perception. Paradoxically, that mystery is concealed in his humanity in order to be revealed in a hidden way by his teaching in parables (4:11-12). The parables reveal what is otherwise hidden (4:22).

Second, God himself reveals the mystery of his kingdom through his word, the word that Jesus preaches and teaches. The use of theological passive formula: "it has been given" indicates that God the Father gives the disciples access to it (4:11). Jesus is the sower of the seed, the word of God that produces repentance and speaks forgiveness to those who receive it.¹²

Third, only his disciples have access to this mystery. They alone are in on it (4:11). This is rather surprising, for the word that reveals this mystery is preached to all. Yet Jesus explains the word only to his disciples who have faith in him (4:1, 10-13, 33-34). He initiates them into the mystery of God's kingdom. They alone have ears to hear the mystery (4:9, 23), because the mystery is always a divine gift that can only be had as it is received through hearing God's word. It comes to the disciples of Jesus through hearing his word rather than their observation of him.

Four, the word that reveals the mystery is like a lamp that lights up a one-roomed ancient Palestinian house at night (4:21-23).¹³ The preaching of the gospel is a theophany, the Father's self-

¹² The term "the word" appears eight times in the explanation of the parable.

¹³ The parable the lamp in 4:21-25 has, most likely, been added there to explain the nature of the harvest that is mentioned in 4:20.

disclosure to his royal sons, a divine self-manifestation that illumines and enlightens the disciples of Jesus. It produces the harvest of light in them.

Fifth, by his preaching Jesus discloses the hidden mysteries of God's kingdom verbally rather than visually. Its manifestation is like the theophanies in the Old Testament. Unlike pagan theophanies in which deities showed their faces visibly to their devotees for replication in the idols that gave ongoing access to them, the Lord "appeared" to the Israelites at Sinai by speaking to them and by his name that was spoken to them with the Aaronic benediction in the divine service. So too, in this age, Jesus discloses God's hidden presence by what he says to his disciples.

Sixth, the power of the kingdom resides mysteriously in the word, the seed that produces the harvest without human assistance (4:26-29), the tiny seed that grows the kingdom and becomes the largest plant in the garden. Only at the end, on the last day, will God's Son and everything else that is now hidden be visibly manifest (4:22). What is now heard will then be seen. So in Mark Jesus conceals the mystery of God's kingdom in his humanity in order to reveal it to his disciples through his teaching of God's word.

Matthew and Luke interpret the mystery in a slightly different way. In Mark Jesus speaks about **the mystery** (singular) of God's kingdom, because Mark wants to emphasise its embodiment in Jesus; in Matthew and Luke he speaks about **the knowledge of its mysteries** (plural). Their focus is on their human appropriation of God's manifold gifts by the reception of Christ and his teachings.

Matthew puts the emphasis on **knowing the word** (13:13, 14, 15, 19, 23).¹⁴ He omits the parable of the lamp, apart from its

¹⁴ Matthew picks up the verb *syniemi* (Hebrew *bin*) from Isa 6:9, 10. See also a possible echo of this in Paul's *synesis* in Col 1:9; 2:2; Eph 3:4.

interpretative sentences about the abundance of gifts for those who are enlightened. This is added to the words of Jesus to his disciples about God's gift of knowledge to them (13:12), the knowledge that leads to repentance and divine healing (13:15). He also adds the words of congratulation by Jesus to his disciples for seeing and hearing what all the prophets had longed for so ardently (13:16-17).¹⁵ So, in Matthew the people who understand the word of the kingdom produce the varied harvest of spiritual health according to their level of understanding. Theophany comes through spiritual understanding, insight into the mysteries of God's hidden rule through his Son Jesus, the Messianic King.

Like Matthew, Luke puts the emphasis on the knowledge of the mysteries of God's kingdom that comes from hearing the word. On the one hand, he stresses the role of the church as the place for divine theophany by adding the clause: "so those who come in can see the light" (Luke 8:16). He seems to envisage the house churches where the gospel was preached in his day. The enlightening word lights up each congregation and shines out from it into the world of darkness. The proclamation of the gospel therefore draws those who are outside the church into it and the light of Christ.¹⁶ On the other hand, instead of focusing

¹⁵ Luke places this unit in 10:23, 24 after his prayer of thanksgiving to the Father for His revelation of Himself to the disciples through him as the Son.

¹⁶ In his commentary on *Luke 1:1-9:50* (Concordia Commentary, Concordia Publishing House: Saint Louis, 1996, 352-53) Art Just Jr. gives this fine summary: "The Lukan hearer will connect the light to Christ and his Gospel. The one who places the Gospel on the Lampstand is Christ, working in the Christian community through those who have been catechized and baptized. After having heard and believed the Word, the baptized are not to hide Christ's Gospel. The illuminating Word that is in them should light up the house church and shine from it, like a beacon, to others journeying toward it. And when the others come after a long journey, the baptized will illuminate the house church for them when they enter it. This illumination would involve the interpretation of the Word of God within the community of the baptized.....The light of Christ's presence in the faithful community shines out from the house church so that those who leave the world and enter the

on **what** is heard, as in Mark and Matthew, Jesus speaks in Luke about **how** the word of God is heard (8:18). It needs to be **retained** for it to produce saving faith (8:12) and the harvest of enlightenment (8:16-18).¹⁷ Only those who keep on hearing the word with a good and honest heart and retain it there through meditation on it receive the gift of knowledge, the knowledge of God's mysteries, for the word alone gives continual access to them. So, in Luke the word of God initiates the disciples into the mysteries of God's kingdom by giving the knowledge of salvation and the enlightenment that comes from the persistent retention of the illuminating word in their hearts. The gospel lights up the circle of Christ's disciples, shines out from them into the world, and attracts people from its darkness to the light of God's presence. The church therefore is the place for theophany, the place where divine mysteries are revealed.

2. Paul's Teaching on Mystery.

In his letters Paul speaks about himself as a mystagogue. He picks up the teaching of Jesus and applies it to the life of the church after the ascension of Jesus. He too regards the Christian faith as a mystery, something that is not reached by mental deduction and human understanding, but a hidden reality that is received and held with a clear conscience (1 Tim 3:9). While that mystery is both concealed and revealed in Jesus the risen Lord, it involves God the Father and the Holy Spirit as well.

The mystery of the faith involves all three persons of the Trinity. Thus Paul speaks about the mystery of God (1 Cor 2:1; Col 2:2), as well as the mysteries of God (1 Cor 4:1). In His wisdom God the Father conceived that mystery before the foundation of the world, a mystery that involves the crucifixion

church may learn how to hear the Gospel by observing the faithful community at worship.”

¹⁷ Luke reworks the sentence to put all the emphasis on the retention of the word: “they are those who, having heard the word with a good and honest heart, **hold onto** it...”

of Jesus the Lord of glory, a mystery that God reveals through the Spirit (1 Cor 2:7-10). It has to do with God's final restoration of all things, the whole universe, under the headship of Christ, the anointed cosmic King (Eph 1:7-10).¹⁸ This involves His reunification of heaven and earth,¹⁹ so that people on earth may join together with the angels in one choir that stands in God's presence and praises Him for the riches of His grace.²⁰ There that choir performs one doxology in praise of God the Father (Eph 1:6, 12).²¹

¹⁸ For exploration of this theme in Ephesians, see Chrys C. Caragounis, *The Ephesian Mystery: Meaning and Content*. Coniectanea biblica: New Testament Series 8. C.W.K Gleerup: Lund, 1977.

¹⁹ See Otfried Hofius, 'Gemeinschaft mit den Engeln im Gottesdienst der Kirche,' *Zeitschrift für Theologie und Kirche* 89 (1992): 189-90. He argues that in Eph 2: 19 the term "fellow citizens of the holy ones", refers to the angels. Since Christ has removed the dividing wall that separated Jews and Gentiles from each other at the temple and both of them from the heavenly world, the saints on earth, already now in the divine service, join with the angels in one song of praise, since they are part of the same assembly, the church on earth and in heaven.

²⁰ By their translation of *eklērothēmen* in Eph 1:11 as a reference to our election (NIV) or our heavenly inheritance (RSV), most English translations obscure Paul's picture of the church as a choir that has been given its "allotted place" in God's presence to proclaim his grace (cf. Eph 1:6, 12, 14). This sense is confirmed by the following verse where Paul maintains that God's people are to be praise-singers of God's grace (see Rudolph Schnackenburg, *Der Brief an die Epheser*, Evangelisch-katholischer Kommentar zum Neuen Testament, vol. X, Benziger Verlag: Einsiedeln and Neukirchener Verlag: Neukirchen-Vluyn, 1982, 61). As in Col 1:12, Paul here speaks about the allotment of Christians to membership in the heavenly choir, just as the Levitical musicians, like all the priests, were assigned by "lot" into their division for service at the temple in Jerusalem (see 1 Chr 25:8, 9, and John W. Kleinig, *The Lord's Song: The Basis, Function and Significance of Choral Music in Chronicles*. Journal for the Study of the Old Testament: Supplement Series 156. Sheffield Academic Press: Sheffield, 1993, 89-95).

²¹ See my exploration of this theme in "The Mystery of Doxology". Pages 129-47 in Paul T. McCain and John R. Stephenson (eds.), *Mysteria Dei: Essays in Honor of Kurt Marquart*, Concordia Theological Seminary Press: Fort Wayne, 2000.

The mystery of cosmic restoration begins with God's creation a new man in baptism as an act of renovation (Eph 4:24) and His creation of a new humanity by His reconciliation of the Jews and Gentiles with Him through the preaching of the gospel (Eph 2:11-12). That new community is the temple of the triune God, the place where both Jews and Gentiles have liturgical access to God the Father through His Son by the Holy Spirit (Eph 2:18-22; 3:12). There the mystery of Christ and his role in the restoration of the cosmos is manifest to all people on earth and to all the cosmic powers by the incorporation of the Gentiles as co-heirs with the Israelites in the body of Christ (Eph 3:6-10). So the church plays a central role in God's administration of His mystery on earth, for in it and by it God prefigures and previews the restoration of all creation under Christ.

The mystery of cosmic restoration includes some puzzling features, such as Israel's apparent rejection of Christ (Rom 11:25), the transformation of both the living and the dead at Christ's appearance at the close of the age (1 Cor 15:51), and the restricted operation of lawlessness (2 Thess 2:7). God the Father was "silent" about this mystery and kept it "hidden" and "unknown" for ages before the advent of His Son (Rom 16:25; 1 Cor 2:7; Eph 3:5, 9). God gives access to that mystery by the administration of His grace through Paul and the other apostles (Eph 3:2). It involves the hidden glorification as those who already now stand with Christ in His glorious presence (1 Cor 2:7), their enjoyment of the good things that He has prepared for those who love Him (1 Cor 2:9), and their reception of the invisible gifts that He has freely given to them (1 Cor 2:12).

The mystery of the Christian faith is embodied in the crucified, risen Lord Jesus (1 Cor 2:1-2).²² Paul therefore speaks about "the mystery of Christ" (Eph 3:4; Col 4:3). The mystery of God is "Christ, in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and

²² See Gregory Lockwood, *1 Corinthians*, Concordia Commentary, Concordia Publishing House: Saint Louis, 2000, 81-82, for the reading of *mysterion* (mystery) rather than *martyrion* (testimony) in 1 Cor 2:1.

knowledge” (Col 2:2, 3). All the spiritual riches of God are available in Christ, hidden in his human poverty. Interestingly, in his letters Paul does not concentrate on the revelation of that mystery in the historical events of Christ’s life, death and resurrection, but on its present revelation in and through the church.

In 1 Timothy 3:16 Paul sums up the mystery of Christ, the great mystery of liturgical piety that the church confesses, in an intricate little hymn with paired couplets that speak of his paradoxical status as human and yet divine.²³

*Great, we confess, is the mystery of godliness:
he was disclosed²⁴ in the flesh,
was vindicated by the Spirit;
was seen by angels,
was proclaimed among the Gentiles;
was believed in throughout the world,
was taken up in glory.²⁵*

Here the mystery of Christ is confessed with six passive verbs that do not tell what he has done but what has been done to him,

²³ For a comprehensive analysis of this poem see Andrew Y. Lau, *Manifest in Flesh: The Epiphany Christology of the Pastoral Principles*, Wissenschaftliche Untersuchungen zum Neuen Testament Series 2, 86, J. C. B. Mohr (Paul Siebeck): Tübingen, 1996, 91-114.

²⁴ See too the use of *phaneroô* in Rom 16:26 and Col 1:27 for the disclosure of a mystery.

²⁵ This layout of the poem emphasizes its arrangement in three couplets that describe three shifts of location: from earth to heaven, from heaven to earth, from earth to heaven. It shows how the risen Lord Jesus joins together the earthly and the heavenly domains. It could also be read as a poem with two parallel stanzas of three lines that deal with his appearance in three domains: the world, the church, and heaven. It could then be arranged as follows:

*He was disclosed in the flesh,
was vindicated by the Spirit,
was seen by angels;
was proclaimed among the Gentiles,
was believed in throughout the world,
was taken up in glory.*

In this reading the vindication by the Spirit is understood as a reference to what happened at Pentecost.

or, more exactly, what God has done for him.²⁶ The distinctive feature of this easily memorised poem is the bi-focal location of each of the three couplets. In these couplets we have a shift from earth to heaven, followed by a shift from heaven back to earth, and then from earth back to heaven.

This remarkable little confession of faith shows how the risen Lord Jesus bridges heaven and earth. By his incarnation on **earth** he has been revealed in the flesh, proclaimed among the nations, and believed in throughout the world; by his bodily resurrection and ascension into **heaven** he has also been vindicated by God's Spirit, seen by the angels, and taken up in glory before the Father. The mystery that the church confesses therefore reaches up bodily from earth to heaven, out to the angels, down to the nations, out to believers all over the world, and back to heaven. Christ has come from the Father to bring people from all over the world back with him into the glory of the Father. Significantly, this poem emphasises the proclamation of Christ's presence "among the nations" and their faith in Him. People on earth have access to that cosmic mystery by the preaching of Christ and faith in him, faith that is produced by God through his word. Thus the mystery of Christ is cosmic in its extent, for it unites the physical human body with the God's Spirit, the angels with people from all nations, and believers on earth with God in heaven.

²⁶ See Joachim Jeremias, "Der erste Brief an Timotheus," *Die Briefe an Timotheus und Titus*, Das Neue Testament Deutsch, Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht: Göttingen, 1963, 23. He also proposes, rather helpfully, that this poem with its three contrasting couplets is patterned on the ancient Egyptian and wider oriental ritual for the enthronement of a king (23-25). This was enacted in three stages. The king was first exalted as a person with divine status, presented as king before his subjects, and then acclaimed as king by his subjects at his enthronement which marked the beginning of his reign. Thus God has exalted his incarnate Son at his resurrection, presented him to the angels in heaven and nations on earth, and has gained the allegiance of believers in him on earth by his enthronement with him in the heavenly realm. Each of these three enactments occurs both on earth and in heaven.

The mystery of Christ revolves around his hidden presence in the church. When the disciples of Christ, the saints, gather together for worship, they are involved in a great mystery, something hidden from sight and all the senses, something invisible and yet real. St Paul speaks of it in this way in Col 1:25-28:

*I became the minister (of the church), according to the task of keeping God's house²⁷ that was given to me to you, to proclaim the word of God fully²⁸, the **mystery** that has been kept hidden away²⁹ throughout the ages and generations but has now been disclosed³⁰ to his saints. To them God chose to make known³¹ how great among the Gentiles are the riches³² of the glory of **this mystery, which is Christ among you³³** (plural), the hope of glory.*

²⁷ Paul uses the Greek word *oikonomia*. This term refers to the management of a household and the administration of its business by an *oikonomos*, a steward or administrator. He envisages the church both as God's household and his house, his holy temple, the place where he resides with his glory. Both these terms are also used elsewhere in connection with the mystery of Christ (1 Cor 4:1; Eph 1:10; 3:2, 9).

²⁸ Rather surprisingly, Paul uses the verb *plêroō* here. It normally means to fill or complete or bring to completion. It is used similarly in Rom 15:19 where it refers to commission to bring the gospel to its completion by preaching it all over the world. By its use Paul seems to combine two ideas, the full enactment of God's word and its full proclamation. This corresponds with his use of *plêroō*, "fill", in 1:9; 2:10; 4:17, his use of *plêrōma*, "fullness", in 1:19 and 2:9, and his use of *plêrophoria*, which means "full delivery", "full measure", or "full assurance" in 2:2 (cf. 4:12)

²⁹ See too the use of the passive participle *apokekrymmenon* for divine activity in 1 Cor 2:7; Eph 3:9; cf. Mark 4:22; Luke 10:21.

³⁰ The verb *phaneroō* is also used for the disclosure of a mystery in Rom 16:26; 1 Tim 3:16.

³¹ The verb *gnōrizō* is also used for making known of a mystery in Eph 1:9; 3:3, 5, 10; 6:19.

³² See too the reference to the riches of mystery in Eph 3:8-13.

³³ Or "in you". If we go with the image of the church as an assembly, then this phrase is best translated by "among you", but if go with the image of the church as the temple of God, then it is best translated by "in you".

Here Paul depicts himself as a mystagogue, a person who initiates others into a mystery. That mystery is the dwelling of the risen Lord Jesus with his people in the church, the assembly in God's presence that is open to both Jews and Gentiles. Thus the inclusion of Gentiles in the church through Christ is part of that mystery (cf. Eph 3:4). Since Christ resides among the saints, God's glory is there too in all its riches, for the fullness of divinity dwells bodily in Christ (cf. Col 1:19; 2:9). Through Christ they therefore have access to God's glory, his manifest presence in the divine service. By his preaching Paul discloses that mystery to the saints, those who are united with Christ and so share in his holiness. They alone have access to it. Thus Paul reveals the presence and activity of the risen Lord to the saints by proclaiming God's word fully to them, the gospel that proclaims Christ and makes him known to them (cf. Rom 16:26-27; 1 Cor 2:1-2; Eph 3:6).

Apart from God's word His people have no access to the risen Lord Jesus; they have no knowledge or experience of him apart from the gospel. That word initiates them into the mystery of Christ, something that no eye has seen, no ear has heard, and no human heart has ever conceived (1 Cor 2:6-10). The disclosure of Christ's hidden presence in the divine service gives the faithful a glimpse of their future glory, a foretaste of heaven here on earth. Thus, since the preaching of the gospel reveals the hidden presence of Christ, Paul also speaks about "the mystery of the gospel" (Eph 6:19).

Both Christ and the church are part and parcel of the same great mystery. They are, in fact, inseparable from each other, like the head of a body from its body. Thus Paul claims that the union of husband and wife as one flesh in marriage reflects the even greater mystery of the invisible union through baptism of Christ with the church, his holy bride (Eph 6:32). Through its union with him the church does not just make the mystery of God's wisdom known in the earthly realm to both Jews and Gentiles; it also makes it known to angels and demons, the rulers and

authorities in the heavenly realms (Eph 3:8-12). And the core of that mystery is this. In Christ “we (Jews and Gentiles) have access³⁴ to God (the Father) in boldness and confidence through faith in him”. Thus, just as a wife has access to her father in law through her husband, so the church has hidden access to God the Father through His Son.

The mystery of Christ also involves the work of the Holy Spirit. Paul claims that this mystery was originally revealed by the Spirit to Christ’s holy apostles and prophets (Eph 3:4-6). The Spirit showed them what they had to say. They, then, were the original custodians of this mystery. But they did not keep it to themselves, nor did they restrict access to some select initiates. They publicised it in the world for the benefit of the whole human race. Their public proclamation of this mystery has been passed on to us through the books that were canonised as the sacred Scriptures for use in the divine service. These books are, if you like, mystery books. Through them the Holy Spirit continues to reveal the mystery of Christ to those who have ears to hear what they have to say.

The Holy Spirit did not just reveal the mystery of Christ to the apostles in the early church. Through his Spirit God also revealed the mystery of Christ and his invisible gifts to those who heard their preaching (1 Cor 2:7-16). Both the preachers and the hearers are inspired by the Spirit. Through the work of the Holy Spirit the hearers have access to the mystery that Paul proclaimed to them. Like the preachers they too have the Holy Spirit, so that they may know what they receive from God

³⁴ See also Rom 5:2; Eph 2:18. Like the verb *prosagô* which is used in the LXX for the presentation of an animal as an offering (eg. Exod 29:10; Lev 1:3; 3:3; 4:14; 7:6; 23:8) or a person as a priest to God (eg. Exod 29:4, 8; 40:12; Lev 8:9, 10), the noun *prosagôgê* is a liturgical term (K. L. Schmidt, “*prosagô, prosagôgê,*” *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, ed. G. Kittel, trans. G. Bromiley, Eerdmans: Grand Rapids, vol. I, 1967, 131-33). This verse recalls 2:18 with its reference to the access of both Jews and Gentiles to God the Father in his new temple through Jesus by the Holy Spirit for audience with him.

through Christ (1 Cor 2:12). The Spirit opens them up to the invisible mystery of God. He attunes their minds to Christ's mind, so that they can understand God's thoughts and acts, His hidden dealings with his people. God the Father "enlightens"³⁵ them by His Spirit, so that in Christ they already now know the riches of their inheritance and experience the resurrecting power by which he energises them (Eph 1:15-23).

The mystery of Christ is revealed in his hidden epiphany, the manifestation of his divinity in human flesh, which is also the theophany of God the Father, His manifestation as God. Unlike the theophanies of pagan gods, that epiphany of Christ does not give us access to God visibly through the human eye in the form of an idol; it gives us access to him **aurally** through his name and word, the message of the gospel. The organ for spiritual sight, the organ for the reception of his epiphany, is the faithful heart, the human conscience. It must be cleansed and remain pure if it is to receive and retain the holy mystery of God (1 Tim 3:9; cf. Matt 5:8). A clear conscience receives insight into the hidden mystery of Christ that is revealed by God the Father through His word by the power of the Spirit. The cleansing that is given in baptism and received by faith "enlightens"³⁶ the eyes of the heart³⁷, so that it receives and knows what God the Father gives to the saints both now and in the age to come (Eph 1:15-22). Thus the mystery that is hidden from human sight is known by the human heart that receives the life-giving, energising, revealing light of Christ.

The saints have access to the mysteries of God through the hidden presence of Christ in the church. The church is the place

³⁵ See 1 Cor 4:5; Eph 3:9; 2 Tim 1:10; Heb 6:4; 10:32.

³⁶ See also Eph 3:9; 2 Tim 1:10; Heb 6:4; 10:32; cf. 2 Cor 4:4, 6.

³⁷ Paul may be reflecting on the words of congratulation by Jesus to his disciples in Matthew 13:16-17 and Luke 10:23-24. In his Gospel Luke develops the motif of the eyes that see Christ and his salvation (2:30; 10:23-24; 11:34-36; 24:31) in contrast to eyes that are blind and closed to him (4:20; 6:33-42; 19:42; 24:16).

where people are led into those mysteries and experience them by virtue of their hidden access to God the Father and his grace in the divine service. Those who are ministers of the gospel are therefore custodians of those mysteries. Thus Paul claims that he and his fellow pastor Sosthenes should be regarded as “stewards of the mysteries of God” (1 Cor 4:1). In Greek, the term steward, *oikonomos*, is quite literally a “housekeeper”, the chief slave in charge of his master’s household and the management of its affairs. Paul’s use of this term here for his vocation as a minister of the gospel recalls his mention of the church as God’s temple in the previous chapter, his place of residence (1 Cor 2:16-17). As stewards of God’s mysteries they work with what is unseen. The quality and success of their work will therefore only be evident on the day when Christ appears to bring to light the things that are now hidden in darkness (1 Cor 4:2-5).

The Lutheran confessions quite rightly equate the administration of the divine mysteries with the ministry of word and sacrament, the ministry of the apostolic gospel and its enactment (Apol XXIV, 80). Like Paul and Sosthenes, all pastors are called to be mystagogues; they all are responsible for the mystery of Christ and for the initiation of people into it. As they lead the divine service they enact and proclaim that mystery. They use the word of God to reveal what is otherwise concealed until the close of the age. Their task is to proclaim the crucified Christ (1 Cor 2:1-2) and gives thanks to God for him as the Lord of all creation (Eph 1:15-23).

Conclusion

We can, I think, best commend the Christian faith to post-modern people when we ourselves are captivated imaginatively by the wonder of it and live in the mystery of it. This does not mean that we will engage in ritual mystification and intellectual obfuscation, for even though the mystery of Christ is hidden, it is open and accessible to all people. The heart of it is Christ’s

enlightening presence in the church. The church is the place where theophany occurs, the place where the glory of the triune God is revealed here on earth as a preview of the final cosmic epiphany. This happens in the divine service. There, through the risen Lord Jesus who brings the Father to us and us to the Father, we have access by the Holy Spirit to heaven here on earth. That heavenly mystery is revealed to us and all the saints by the proclamation of God's word and its enactment in the divine service.

God's word initiates us and all believers into the mystery of Christ and his wonderful presence with us which involves us in his work of cosmic restoration. Through God's word and our faith in it, we get to know the triune God as we are drawn into the fellowship of the Son with the Father and receive all the spiritual blessings that he gives to us in his Son (Eph 1:3). We receive those heavenly blessings because we are already now raised with Christ and enthroned with him in the heavenly realms (Eph 2:6). We therefore begin to share in the divine life of the Holy Trinity here on earth through our union and communion with Jesus. Through our ongoing reception of the Holy Spirit "the eyes of our hearts" are enlightened so that we see what is otherwise unseen (Eph 1:17-19), the riches and weight of God's glory that is too large for us to take in and enjoy, in all its fullness, here on earth (2 Cor 4:17).

By our attention to God's word and the enlightenment of the Holy Spirit, we begin to see ourselves and the world around us with the eyes of God. And that transforms our imagination. Our vision of God's hidden presence with us, our vision of his glory, colours our perception of reality, so that we begin to see what had previously remained unnoticed and unappreciated by our darkened imagination. We see everything much more coherently as it is in the light of Christ the cosmic King, for he is not only the image of the invisible God but all things also cohere in him (Col 1:13, 17). We see how he includes us mere mortals in his work of cosmic restoration.

So as long as we live here on earth we walk by faith and not by sight (2 Cor 5:7). We live as citizens of heaven here on earth. Our vision of God reshapes us and governs our behaviour. And that is how we best commend the mystery of Christ to our friends and acquaintances. We know that our life is hidden with Christ in God (Col 3:3), even though that is by no means self-evident to others or even to us. We know that wherever we go the triune God goes with us, for Christ is in us as we are in him. We know that when Christ appears, we shall appear with him in glory (1 John 3:2). Then the mystery of Christ will be fulfilled. We shall be like him, for we shall see him face to face (1 Cor 13:12). Then the mystery of cosmic restoration will be fully manifest.