

**Text: Col 1.26-27**

Some months ago, back in March, I received a question about the relationship between the term “mystery” (in our English Bibles and in the Greek) and “sacrament” found translating “mystery” in some verses in the NT.

The Vulgate doesn't always use “sacrament” to translate “mystery.” There are 28 occurrences of “mystery” in the Greek NT, only seven of them are translated with “sacrament” in Latin. For the rest, the Latin simply transliterates the Greek, “mysterium.” (It is a bit of a *mystery* to me why the Latin is translated that way.)

For example, if you go to our text, you will find both translation and transliteration:

Col 1.26-27 *that is*, the mystery [Lat. *mysterium*] which has been hidden from the *past* ages and generations, but has now been manifested to His saints,<sup>27</sup> to whom God willed to make known what is the riches of the glory of this mystery [Lat. *sacramenti*] among the Gentiles, which is Christ in you, the hope of glory.

Here, you have the same concept, and both Latin terms. A mystery!

If you look up “sacramentum” on Google, you will find “mystery” as the translation. However, I've found a few other things that are worth spending some time on to increase our understanding.

We know, of course, that in English, the liturgical churches use *sacrament* for what we call an *ordinance*: the Lord's Table or communion.

Since today is our communion service, I thought it would fit very well with our theme for today.

We are going to go on a word study journey to show how the two terms came to be used for each other, then how that relates to our communion service.

## I. The Greek background of *mystery*

### A. In the Gk mystery religions

1. These religions are obscure because their devotees swore vows of silence
2. Their doctrines were mysteries, their followers were to keep them a mystery

3. Key aspect: taking this vow was an initiatory rite

B. Among the Gk philosophers

1. Adopted the vocabulary of mystery religions
2. For the philosophers, the mystic teaching of striving for truth was a pursuit of mystery
3. These truths are no longer ways to connect to God, but secret teachings

C. In secular usage

1. The term becomes more common or ordinary
2. “The mysteries of life” – we use it this way today (the hidden insights into how life works that one can find by diligence)

## II. The NT use of the word *mystery*

A. In the gospels: used by Jesus on the purpose of parables

Mk 4.11 And He was saying to them, “To you has been given the mystery of the kingdom of God, but those who are outside get everything in parables,

See also Mt 13.11 and Lk 8.10

1. The disciples are differentiated from the outsiders
2. The message is that God gives a *true appreciation* for all the kingdom means to his disciples alone

The key to knowing is not initiation, but belief.

We have to give just a summary statement here; this is a big topic!

B. In Paul:

1. General usage:
  - a. The things revealed by the gift of prophecy (1 Cor 13.2, 14.2)
  - b. The final destiny of Israel (Rm 11.25)
  - c. The mystery of the Rapture (1 Co 15.51)

- d. The mystery of Christ and his church illustrated by marriage (Eph 5.32)
  - e. The mystery of last things (2 Th 2.3, 7; Rev 17.5, 7)
2. The mystery of Christ
- a. Apostolic preaching is Christ, the mystery of God
    - 1) Paul preached the cross, to the Jews a stumbling block, to the Gks foolishness (1Co 1.23) [compare parables]
    - 2) Paul offered the plain testimony of God (1Co 2.1)
    - 3) Paul spoke God's wisdom in a mystery (1Co 2.7-8)

1 Cor 2.6-8 ¶ Yet we do speak wisdom among those who are mature; a wisdom, however, not of this age nor of the rulers of this age, who are passing away;<sup>7</sup> but we speak God's wisdom in a mystery, the hidden *wisdom* which God predestined before the ages to our glory;<sup>8</sup> *the wisdom* which none of the rulers of this age has understood; for if they had understood it they would not have crucified the Lord of glory;

- a) God's wisdom was hidden in the past
  - b) Revealed in the present
  - c) But remains hidden to unbelief
- b. The mystery of Christ is made known in believers (Col 1.26-27)

Col 1.26-27 *that is*, the mystery [Lat. *mysterium*] which has been hidden from the *past* ages and generations, but has now been manifested to His saints,<sup>27</sup> to whom God willed to make known what is the riches of the glory of this mystery [Lat. *sacramenti*] among the Gentiles, which is Christ in you, the hope of glory.

### III. The connection in the church of *mystery* and *sacrament*

A. The church began to use the term mystery to refer to baptism/Lord's supper

- 1. They were reviving the old Gk mystery religion idea in a specific way

- a. In the Gk mystery religions, their initiation rites gave participants a share in their gods (and their secrets)
  - b. So too in Christianity, baptism and Lord's supper connect the disciple to Christ
2. In baptism and Lord's supper recreate *symbolically* the acts of Christ to initiate Christianity (death, burial, resurrection)
  3. Sacrament became the Latin term for the same, though mixed with *mysterium* as we noted

## B. A quick background on the term sacrament

### 1. Roots

- a. *Sacro* = consecrate, dedicate, devote
  - b. *Sacer* = sacred, holy
2. *Sacramentum* originally had the idea of a sum of money pledged in a lawsuit where the money of the loser went to religious services (like a modern bet for "a charity of the winner's choice")
  3. Later, it became a technical term for a soldier's oath of service
    - a. An oath has the character of an initiation into service
    - b. A soldier gave over his life to the service of his emperor

## C. The joining of the two terms in church history

"The terms first become full equivalents only in Christian texts, since the Romans conscripted *sacramentum* for military use. Tert. and some later writers applied the military use to the Christian concept of the *sacramentum*."<sup>1</sup>

1. In the church, the disciple takes an oath to follow Christ, to devote himself completely to him
2. That oath symbolized by both baptism (initiation) and communion (renewal)

<sup>1</sup> Günther Bornkamm, "Μυστήριον, Μυέω," in *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, ed. Gerhard Kittel, Geoffrey W. Bromiley, and Gerhard Friedrich, vol. 4 (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1964), 827.

a. These rites now called *mystery* in Gk

b. And *sacramentum* in Latin

In essence, we are soldiers for Christ, entirely devoted to him.

**Conclusion:**

All that is very interesting, but here is the application.

When you participate in communion, is it merely an ordinary ritual you do because it is what Christians do...

Or... do you mean to devote yourself entirely to Christ?