

# “The Mystery of Christ” in Ephesians

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Not only does God exist; He also rewards those who seek Him. And He has condescended to reveal Himself to mankind both in His works and His words. The mystery of Christ, for example, was a former secret now revealed for everyone who has ears to hear. It is one of the few things that deserve to be called “awesome.” A primary source for learning about it is Ephesians, a pithy epistle of the Apostle Paul. You should read that epistle many times.

Should you also read the study I offer here? Only if you think I might help you navigate God’s Word. I believe in normal (usually literal) interpretation of the prophecies—and in the Lord’s coming eternal kingdom on earth. I have tried hard to make this study understandable for any serious Bible student. And I have added footnotes for those who have more experience or time to go deeper.

*Unless otherwise indicated, all Bible quotations in this study are from the New International Version 1984 (NIV). NASB means New American Standard Bible. Sometimes “Christ” is changed to “Messiah” and “mystery” is changed to “revealed secret.” Unless stated, all emphasis is added.*

## Introduction

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In reading this, then, you will be able to understand my insight into *the mystery of Christ*, which was not made known to men in other generations as it has now been revealed by the Spirit to God’s holy apostles and prophets. (Ephesians 3:4-5)

And pray for us, too, that God may open a door for our message, so that we may proclaim *the mystery of Christ*, for which I am in chains. Pray that I may proclaim it clearly, as I should. (Colossians 4:3-4)

Slowly read the verses in the box above. Only in these verses does the Bible use the term “the mystery of Christ.” They are from Ephesians and Colossians, twin epistles with much of their content in common. The apostle Paul wrote them both from prison at the same time, the Acts 28 period. The passage quoted below shows some of the same things in similar language—and that “the mystery” is not just *about* Christ but *is* Christ. The apostle describes his participation in

Christ’s afflictions, for the sake of His body, which is the church...the commission God gave me to present to you *the word of God in fullness—the mystery* that has been kept hidden for ages and generations, but is *now disclosed* to the saints. To them God has chosen to make known among the Gentiles the glorious riches of *this mystery, which is Christ in you*, the hope of glory.

We proclaim *Him*, admonishing and teaching everyone with all wisdom, so that we may present everyone perfect in Christ...I labor, struggling with all His energy... struggling for you...and for all who have not met me personally... in order that they may know *the mystery of God, namely, Christ*. (Colossians 1:24 to 2:3)

All Bible teachers should share Paul’s concern to make known this “mystery.” But nowadays many misunderstand and misuse it, as did some of my early teachers. They especially loved Ephesians and what they wrongly called “the church which is the mystery.” They thought it meant that the church was unforeseen by and unrelated to earlier revelation. They thought our current “age of grace” is temporary and will be replaced by law. No one, they said, really explained the church until Paul wrote Ephesians. Therefore, they partly discounted some other New Testament teachings, even whole books, as “not church truth.” I now believe they misapprehended both the mystery and its consequences.

They started wrong when they put Paul’s prison epistles in a separate package. They did not harmonize that evidence with all the other evidence. For example, the verses quoted above from

Ephesians 3 and Colossians 1 mean that many others (including all New Testament writers) knew and preached the mystery. And the verses from Colossians 4 show that it is the same as the gospel.

**Understandable.** If this was a “mystery,” will it be hard to understand? By no means. As you can see, the biblical term refers, as it usually does, to truth previously unrevealed, not mysterious. Accordingly, I sometimes translate as “revealed secret” rather than “mystery.” This former secret about Christ, though contrary to culture, is understandable. And to define it, the Book of Ephesians will give us plenty of evidence. We will see what it does not mean and what it does mean. Consider briefly that it is not unique to these epistles and not unrelated to earlier revelation.

- **“The mystery of Christ” is not unique** to Ephesians and Colossians. Although only the apostle Paul—and only there—called it a “mystery,” other church founders knew it. This “mystery,” he announced, “has now been revealed by the Spirit to God’s holy apostles and prophets” (Eph. 3:4-5). That would include writers such as John and Peter. What possible reason could they have to avoid discussing it—especially since they often wrote to Gentiles as Paul did? (In fact, as you will see, it was essential; they could not avoid it.)
- **“The mystery of Christ” is not unrelated** to God’s former program. It is not brand new, completely unforeseen, as my teachers thought. They thought it was the church (Greek *ekklesia*) Jesus promised to build (Matt. 16:18). Indeed, the *ekklesia* is involved in the mystery but is not like a new star in the sky. That term was well known from the Greek version of the Old Testament Scriptures. It referred to Israel assembled as God’s kingdom people in the past, also to His kingdom people in the future (now being formed).

In short, “the revealed secret of Christ” was known to all New Testament writers and in line with Old Testament glimpses of the New Testament church (*ekklesia*). From Ephesians we will see that it is primarily about Christ rather than the church, and is the same as the gospel.

- **It is primarily about Christ rather than the church.** It concerns Him as *Christ* (that is, *Messiah*), the promised King. The use of His royal title is significant, since that always points to His coming triumph and kingdom. The secret was the universal extent of that kingdom and the character of His body through which He will rule. He will rule over “all things in heaven and on earth” (Eph. 1:9-10). And He will inherit not as a single individual but as Head over “the church which is his body” (Eph. 1:22-23). He is now forming that church/body, composed of believing Gentiles as well as believing Jews.
- **It is the gospel** (good news) being preached to all. That is evident when you read Paul’s prayer request near the end of both epistles. Reread it in Colossians 4:3-4 above. The same request in Ephesians 6:19-20 said Paul was “in chains” for and wanted to “fearlessly make

known **the mystery of the gospel.**” That seems to mean “the mystery which is the gospel.”<sup>1</sup> So these parallel passages equate “the mystery of *Christ*” in Colossians with “the mystery of *the gospel*” in Ephesians. Since Paul was “in chains” for preaching it, it must refer to his public message heard by his enemies. It cannot then be basically different from his preaching recorded in some detail in Acts chapters 21-26. But the good news he preached then was no different from that preached throughout Acts—identical with that in the Gospels (see Mark 1:1, 15; 16:15).<sup>2</sup> This equivalence is of great importance in defining this mystery.

**A Summary.** So “the mystery of Christ” is God’s good news fully revealed to all the founders of the church—and preached everywhere to save the lost. Only Ephesians and Colossians use that term and explore certain angles, especially that of believing Gentiles. Here is a summary of the evidence we will look at.

**“The mystery of Christ” is that Jesus is the Messiah,  
who will rule over the whole universe  
through those who receive His life and are thus joined to Him,  
whether they are Jews or Gentiles.**

## **A. Definitions of *Christ/Messiah, Mystery, and Church***

### **The Meaning of *Christ/Messiah***

*Messiah* and *Christ* both represent the same royal title in two different languages. *Messiah* is for Aramaic *Messias*; *Christ* is for Greek *Cristos*. Neither is a translation but simply says the Greek or Aramaic title in English. The Greek and Aramaic titles both meant “anointed [one].” So did their Old Testament Hebrew equivalent, *Mashiach*. As a title *Mashiach* meant the one “anointed” to be king by having oil poured on his head. The oil symbolized God’s Spirit giving him power and understanding to rule (as seen in Isa. 11:1–2).

For example, both Saul (1 Sam. 9:15-17; 10:1) and David (1 Sam. 16:13; 2 Sam. 2:4; 5:3) were so anointed. David refused to take vengeance on Saul because Saul was “the LORD’s **anointed** [Hebrew *Mashiach*, Greek *Cristos*].” He said this in 1 Samuel 24:6 (twice) and in 26:11. Psalm 2:2 describes the day when “the kings...and the rulers gather together against the LORD and against his **Anointed One.**” The Hebrew original has *Mashiach*; the Greek version has *Cristos*. In the next stanza of the psalm God calls this Anointed One “my King” (Ps. 2:6).

<sup>1</sup> Apparently Paul calls the mystery “this gospel” also in Ephesians 3:6-7.

<sup>2</sup> See my study of the “[Evangelistic Sermons in Acts](#),” also the “Gospel of Mark” section in “[The Four Gospels: the Kingdom Offered & Postponed](#).”

**This royal meaning persists** when the title *Christ/Cristos* (=Messiah/Messias) is used in the New Testament. In fact, that was the foundation message for the church. Here are some sample passages from the Gospels and Acts, with that title or its equivalents bolded:

- Matthew 2:2-3. “Magi...asked, ‘Where is the one who has been born **king of the Jews?**’... When King Herod heard this...he asked [the religious experts] where **the Christ [Cristos = Messiah]** was to be born.” It is evident that “king of the Jews” and “the Christ” are interchangeable.
- Luke 9:20. “‘Who do you say I am?’” Jesus asked His disciples. “Peter answered, ‘the **Christ [Cristos = Messiah] of God.**’” This was the Great Confession that Jesus is the One anointed by God to rule, the Messiah. It appears in all four Gospels.<sup>3</sup>
- Luke 20:41, 44. “How is it that they say that **the Christ [Cristos = Messiah] is the Son of David?**... David calls him ‘Lord.’ How then can he be his son?” With these questions Jesus finished a great final debate with the religious leaders. They could not answer because they considered the promised King (the Christ) only a “son of David.” We will not discuss here whether His title *Christ* ever includes His divinity. This passage, like many others, shows that it certainly refers to His royalty.
- Luke 23:1-2. “Then the whole assembly rose and led him off to Pilate. And they began to accuse him, saying ‘...He...claims to be **Christ [Cristos = Messiah], a king.**’”
- John 1:41. This verse reports and explains Andrew’s original witness to his brother Simon. Look at the two parts, John (a) first reports Andrew’s original words, including the Aramaic title Andrew used (*Messian*), then (b) translates that title into Greek (*Cristos*). The words in

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<sup>3</sup> This Luke 9:20 version of the Great Confession (“the Messiah of God”) was made at Caesarea Philippi. Mark 8:29 reports the same confession on the same occasion as simply “You are the Messiah.” He omits “of God,” the source of the anointing. Matthew 16:16 reports the “Messiah” title but also adds “the Son of the living God.” Did this mean that Mark and Luke omitted a major element? Of course not, because Jesus’ Sonship is the same as His Messiahship from another perspective. It does not refer to His divinity (though He is divine) but to His humanity. When He was anointed to rule (that is, became Messiah), He became God’s Heir (Son) as a man! Hebrews 1:4-5 shows that this aspect of Sonship was **new** for Him. It (a) is showing how as a man “he **became** [not already was] **...superior to the angels,**” (b) calls “Son” a “name he **has inherited,**” and (c) quotes Psalm 2:7 to show when He acquired it: “You are my Son; **today I have become your Father.**” The next verse in that psalm (2:8) shows what that title implies: “Ask of me, and I will make the nations your inheritance....”

The Gospel of John, being supplementary to the other Gospels, does not include the incident at Caesarea Philippi. However, it repeatedly highlights the same confession that Jesus is the Messiah. See some examples at John 1:41; 3:28; 4:25, 29; 7:41-42; 11:27; 20:31. Sometimes it uses equivalent expressions. For example, Philip testified that Jesus was “the one Moses wrote about, and about whom the prophets also wrote” (1:45). Nathanael called Him “the Son of God...the King of Israel” (1:49). Peter said, “the Holy One of God” (6:69).

parentheses are John’s explanatory translation. NIV *translates neither* title—*Messiah* or *Cristos*—but *says* each of them in English.<sup>4</sup>

- (a) “We have found **the Messiah** [*ton Messiah*]” [Andrew’s testimony, using the Aramaic title.]
- (b) (which translated means **Christ** [*Cristos*]).” [John translates the Aramaic title into Greek.]

- Acts 5:42. Jesus’ Messiahship was the constant theme of apostolic preaching:<sup>5</sup>

*Day after day, in the temple courts and from house to house,  
they never stopped teaching and proclaiming  
the good news that Jesus is the Messiah.  
(NIV 2010)*

In Acts 5:42 NIV 2010 changed the title *Christ* (in NIV 1984) to the equivalent title *Messiah*. I often make the same change. That is proper in any passage, because people generally no longer recognize the royal character of the term *Christ*. Some do for *Messiah*, however. Do not forget that the use of this title (*Christ/Messiah*) is always a reminder of Jesus’ future “coming in his kingdom” (Matt. 16:28; cf. 19:28; 25:31; Luke 19:11, 12, 15; 2 Tim. 4:1). Also consider that this apostolic emphasis on Jesus’ Messiahship must be very important.

### The Meaning of *Mystery*

**The Greek word *musterion***, translated “mystery” or “(revealed) secret” is used twenty-eight times in the New Testament. Found in ten books, it is used most in 1 Corinthians (five times), Ephesians (six times), Colossians (four times), and Revelation (four times). Only in Revelation does it mean (three times) something “mysterious” or hard to understand.<sup>6</sup>

Most often the *musterion* is a former secret God has now revealed. Romans 16:25-26 reflects that meaning: “the mystery hidden for long ages past, but now revealed and made known through the prophetic writings.”<sup>7</sup> It has the same meaning in Ephesians: “the mystery of Messiah, which was not made known to men in other generations as it has now been revealed” (Eph. 3:4-5). This translation is ambiguous, because the clause beginning with “as” could imply that the same secret had been revealed less clearly in the past. Not so, as seen in the parallel passage, Colossians 1:26-27: “the mystery that has been kept hidden for ages and generations, but [not *as*] is now disclosed...this mystery, which is Messiah in you...” So Ephesians 3:4-5 and Colos-

<sup>4</sup> John 1:41 is complicated to translate, even for those who realize the royal meaning of these titles. Technically, NIV *transliterates* each title, that is, puts each into corresponding English letters, but doesn’t give their meaning. The following is my attempt to clarify by paraphrasing the part in parentheses:

The first thing Andrew did was to find his brother Simon and tell him, “We have found the Messiah” (Aramaic for Anointed to rule, which in Greek is *Christ*).

<sup>5</sup> For more discussion of this message in Acts, see the appendix in [“The Book of Acts Self-Study Guide.”](#)

<sup>6</sup> In the books that use it most, *musterion* is in 1 Corinthians 2:7; 4:1; 13:2; 14:2; 15:51 (some Greek manuscripts add 2:1); Ephesians 1:9; 3:3, 4, 9; 5:32; 6:19; Colossians 1:26, 27; 2:2; 4:3; Revelation 1:20; 10:7; 17:5, 7.

sians 1:26-27 both speak of a newly revealed secret, not just a restated one. And both passages say this new truth is about “Messiah” or “Messiah in you,” Jesus’ royal title as we just saw.<sup>8</sup>

New truth about Messiah does not invalidate His title. As such Jesus will come again to rule in glory and honor. Ephesians extols that honor. We must not overlook it or neglect it. It is core to the secret expounded in Ephesians. That secret concerns our participation in Messiah’s honor, we who are amazingly incorporated into His “body.”

### **The Meaning of Church**

**The Greek word is *ekklesia***, which is used many times in the Book of Acts and in many Epistles. But in the four Gospels it appears only in Matthew, one time at 16:18 and two times at 18:17. The first was on the occasion of the disciples’ Great Confession voiced by Simon:

“You are the Messiah [*Cristos*],  
the Son of the living God.” (Matt. 16:16)

Immediately Jesus accepted this title His Father had revealed:

“Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah,  
for this was not revealed to you by man,  
but by my Father in heaven.”

Then He followed with His own revelation, which included His promise to build His *ekklesia*:

“And I tell you that you are Peter,  
and on this rock I will build my **church** [*ekklesia*]....

I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven....” (Matt. 16:17-19)<sup>9</sup>

As just noted, the title *Messiah* meant that Jesus will rule in the predicted kingdom. Therefore, His promise to build the *ekklesia* clearly linked it to the kingdom they anticipated. So did His promise of the keys of (that is, authority in) that kingdom. The Jews often called it “the kingdom of heaven” (a term used in Scripture only in Matthew) because *it will come from heaven*. The picture was from Daniel 2:34-35, in which God’s heavenly “rock that struck the statue became a huge mountain and filled the whole earth.”

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<sup>7</sup> The definition of “mystery” in Romans 16 fits its only use in the Gospels: Matthew 13:11 and its parallels in Mark 4:11 and Luke 8:10. There it refers to new truths (translated “secrets”) about the kingdom, truths revealed only to believers. In Revelation 10:7 it designates the “mystery of God [that] will be accomplished.”

<sup>8</sup> The “mystery of Messiah” is similar to the “mysteries of the kingdom” in that Messiah and the kingdom were both well-known but not in all aspects.

<sup>9</sup> The two revelations from the Father (“You are the Messiah”) and from the Son (“You are Peter...”) are clearly related. Non-Catholics tend to disregard or diminish the “Peter” part of the second, but Catholics misuse it. For discussion see my “[Matthew Self-Study Guide](#).”

**All the Gospels look ahead to the *ekklesia* (church).** As just noted, only Matthew reported the Lord’s promises at the Great Confession to build His church. But Matthew’s exclusive report and exclusive use of the term cannot mean exclusive interest in the church. All four Gospels share that interest; all of them implied that goal. How? By all promising that Messiah would baptize in or with the Spirit—His marvelous work that builds the church. “After me will come one more powerful than I,” said John the Baptist; “I baptize you with water, but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit...” (Mark 1:7-8 = Matt. 3:11 and Luke 3:16). John 1:30-33 gives the same promise, ending with “he who will baptize with the Holy Spirit.”<sup>10</sup>

**Note well who this Baptizer is: *Messiah, not the Spirit.*** This promise was the reason to wait for Pentecost. “Do not leave Jerusalem,” Jesus said, “but wait for the gift my Father promised.... For John baptized with water, but in a few days you will be baptized with [or in] the Holy Spirit” (Acts 1:4-5). Sure enough, that was just what Jesus began doing from heaven at Pentecost (Acts 2:33, 38; 10:47; 11:15-17). In that way He began building “the church [*ekklesia*], which is his body” (Eph. 1:22-23). The apostle Paul explained Spirit baptism in the same terms (note the bolded change in the following):

The body is a unit, though it is made up of many parts.... So it is with Christ. For we were all baptized **with [or in]** one Spirit into one body.... (1 Cor. 12:12-13)

By emphasizing this baptism in the Spirit, all the Gospels pointed to the same result: “the church, which is his body.”<sup>11</sup>

**The term *ekklesia* itself.** What did Jesus mean by calling it that? Since He *did not define it*, He knew they would understand it in line with its current usage.<sup>12</sup> One meaning, for example, was for the assembly of all the citizens of a Greek city to govern themselves. The assembly in Ephesus in Acts 19, though unlawful, was so called (vv. 32, 41).

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<sup>10</sup> There are seven passages that speak of Messiah’s baptizing **with or in** the Spirit. Six of them contrast it to John’s baptizing with or in water. Some use the Greek preposition *en* and some use no preposition. That use or non-use does not change the meaning. “With [or in] water” renders *hudati* in Mark 1:8; Luke 3:16; and Acts 1:5; 11:16; but *en hudati* in Matthew 3:11 and John 1:33. “With [or in] the Spirit” renders *pneumati* in Mark 1:8 but *en pneumati* in Matthew 3:11; Luke 3:16; John 1:33; Acts 1:5; 11:16; and 1 Corinthians 12:13. The agent who baptizes in the Spirit is always Messiah, not the Spirit, so it is misleading to translate “*by one Spirit*” in 1 Corinthians 12.

<sup>11</sup> It doesn’t matter that three Gospels do not mention the *ekklesia* by name. They were all written well after it began—by it and for it.

<sup>12</sup> We must not define a term primarily by its etymology (origin and development) but by its use. *Ekklesia*, for example, started with the ideas of “call” and “out.” But it did not continue to mean a smaller group “called out” from a larger group.

But a more likely meaning for Jews was the one in the Greek version of their Old Testament Scriptures. It meant the *assembly* of Israel as *God’s kingdom people*. That had two phases: pre-exilic and postexilic.

- a. Pre-exilic. From the kingdom’s inauguration until its suspension, God’s people met under God’s direct rulership. Moses used it of this first phase in Deuteronomy 4:10; 9:10; 18:16; et al. He was reminding the next generation of “the commandments the Lord proclaimed ... on the mountain out of the fire, on the day of the *assembly* [Hebrew *qahal*, Greek *ekklesia*]” (Deut. 9:10). Using the same word, Acts 7:38 refers to the same “*assembly* in the desert.” It was thus used for Israel as God’s kingdom assembly on many occasions, as in the times of Solomon (2 Chron. 1:3; 6:3, 12, 13; 7:8) and Jehoshaphat (2 Chron. 20:5, 14).
- b. Postexilic. After the remnant returned from exile, they met hoping for God’s kingdom over them to be restored. They were called the *ekklesia*, for example, in Ezra 10:8, 12, 14.

In the same sense the term was even used predictively. In Psalm 22:22, for example, quoted in Hebrews 2:12, it meant **the assembly in Messiah’s future kingdom**. Looking to that future day, Messiah Jesus speaks to His Father:

He says, “I will declare your name to my brothers; in the presence of the congregation [*ekklesia*] I will sing your praises.” (Heb. 2:12)

That day of course has not come yet. But starting at Pentecost, He is creating the worldwide *ekklesia* “in the presence of” which He will lead our praise to the Father. That meaning for the term is implied by its use starting in Matthew. Local groups representing it are also called by the same name (e.g., 2 Cor. 8:1; 1 Thess. 1:1; Rev. 1:11; 2:1, 8, 12). They are harbingers (signs) of the world to come. Like Messiah Himself, we all await “his appearing and his kingdom” (2 Tim. 4:1). In this *ekklesia*, however, Gentiles are accepted as equal partners with Jews. Under the old covenant they had to be adopted (e.g., Rahab and Ruth).

## B. Survey of the Epistle to the Ephesians

*“The mystery [revealed secret] of Messiah” is the main theme of Ephesians. It involves, among other things, the church and the kingdom. To see the context in which it is discussed, we will now survey Ephesians from that perspective. A worthy interpretation must harmonize with the entire context. Please read the whole epistle, evaluating my survey. After that process we will further consider selected passages defining the mystery.*

In his Epistle to the Ephesians, the apostle Paul says a great deal about the universal church. He explains God’s purposes, power, and principles for it. As usual, he first lays a doctrinal basis (chs. 1-3), then gives practical exhortations (chs. 4-6). We can see his broad outline in what he says to start the second half (4:1):

- “I urge you to live a life worthy [seen in chs. 4-6]
- of the calling you have received.” [seen in chs. 1-3]

So “the calling you have received” summarizes the first half of the book (chs. 1-3). That calling, at the heart of the “mystery,” is to share in Messiah’s one body. Then, “live a life worthy” summarizes the second half of the book (chs. 4-6).<sup>13</sup> In this survey I will use the following general outline of Ephesians:

<b>Part I. Calling of the Church</b>	(Doctrine, Spiritual Wealth)	chapters 1-3
<b>Part II. Conduct of the Church</b>	(Duties, Spiritual Walk)	chapters 4-6

Many commentators notice the two motifs of unity and love that animate this epistle. In that respect I will here adapt comments from Harold Hoehner’s impressive dispensational commentary.<sup>14</sup> First, some indications that unity is emphasized:

- In the New Testament only Ephesians has the word “unity.”
- The term “one” is used fourteen times in Ephesians.
- “In Christ” or equivalent expressions are used thirty-eight times, showing the how and where of this unity.
- Fourteen times the Greek preposition *sun*, meaning “with,” is combined with other words to express union.
- The church is pictured as one body with Christ as Head, one temple for God’s Spirit, one bride/wife.

And now, the importance of *love*:

Unity, then, is a very prominent theme in Ephesians....But how is this unity to be achieved? ... True unity is accomplished when people love one another. The theme of “love” is dominant in Ephesians. Love, both in the verb and noun forms, is found twenty times....Combining the noun and verb usage...about one fifth of all their appearances [in Paul’s writings] occur in this small letter....The frequent occurrence of the term love in such a short book is phenomenal....Love in action within the community of believers fosters unity, the other prominent theme. Unity without love is possible, but love without unity is not.<sup>15</sup>

<sup>13</sup> In “live a life worthy,” NIV paraphrases the Greek with a more common expression. The Greek literally means “walk worthily,” a verb with an adverb modifying it. In Ephesians that Greek verb is used in 2:2, 10; 4:1, 17; 5:2, 8, 15.

<sup>14</sup> Harold W. Hoehner, *Ephesians: An Exegetical Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2002), 102-106. The book is a treasure for anyone wanting competent word studies and conservative consideration of divergent points of view throughout Ephesians. Hoehner was Distinguished Professor of New Testament Studies at Dallas Theological Seminary, where he taught more than thirty years.

<sup>15</sup> Hoehner, *Ephesians*, 104.

**Part I. Calling of the Church (Doctrine, Spiritual Wealth) chapters 1-3**

*Ephesians 1 praises the God who has chosen and predestined certain human beings. He redeems them, enlightens them, gives them His Spirit, and prepares them for eternal glory with Messiah. All the aspects of the mystery (revealed secret) are introduced here.*

**Ephesians 1:1-2.** Here the apostle greets those to whom he writes, the “saints” (God’s separated ones) at Ephesus. These saints are “in Messiah,” an expression which—along with equivalent expressions—is used constantly in this epistle (e.g., 1:1, 3, 4, 6, 7).<sup>16</sup> It implies much more than safety and divine favor. It designates members of Messiah’s body,<sup>17</sup> who will share in His glory.

**Ephesians 1:3-14.** This long doxology has three stanzas (1:3-6, 7-12, 13-14), each ending with the refrain “to the praise of his glory.”<sup>18</sup> It praises the Father, who has chosen and blessed (for now and for ever) the saints *in Messiah*. That opens into the theme of the Epistle, God’s plan that had been largely a secret (“mystery”) but is now revealed. That plan is “to bring all things in heaven and on earth together under one head, even Messiah” (1:10b). In short, to sum up the whole world in Him. This revealed aspect is mostly *what* will happen, and *how*, not *when*. *When* was known in general, though still not in detail: “when the times will have reached their fulfillment” (1:10a). That refers to God’s kingdom in the “last days” (Isa. 2:1-4), described in various phases in many prophecies (such as, Isaiah chapters 11, 35, 60, 65). Referring to such prophecies after Pentecost, the apostle Peter assumed his Jewish audience knew them. God, he said, will

“send the Messiah, who has been appointed for you—even Jesus. He must remain in heaven until the time comes for God to restore everything, *as he promised long ago through his holy prophets.*” (Acts 3:19-21)

So the mystery (revealed secret) was not that Messiah will rule in the last days but His full identity and glory. For example, He will inherit not as just an individual but as including all the chosen ones *in Him* (1:11, 14). That is the point of the first clause of verse 11: “In him we were made heirs” (NIV margin).<sup>19</sup> NASB has “we have obtained an inheritance.” As first deposit and pledge of His plans, He marks each believer by giving him, as promised, the Holy Spirit (1:13-

<sup>16</sup> In Ephesians I count “in Messiah” thirteen times.

<sup>17</sup> See “the church [*ekklesia*], which is his body” in 1:22-23.

<sup>18</sup> Each stanza features a different member of the Trinity. The refrain is slightly longer at the end of the first stanza (1:6).

<sup>19</sup> The main Greek verb in 1:11a has the same root (*klero*) as the noun for “inheritance” in verse 14. NIV text (not margin) obscures this first reference to our inheriting by translating “In him we **were** also **chosen.**”

14; cf. Rom. 8:17, 23). All of this procedure is related to ultimate issues, thus in “the heavenly realms” (1:3).<sup>20</sup>

**Ephesians 1:15-23.** In these verses Paul prays for the Ephesians to grow in their knowledge of God’s goodness and power just sketched. In verses 18-19 he prays (in three phrases) for them to know

1. “the hope to which [God] has called you” (v. 18b)
2. “the riches of his glorious inheritance in [or among] the saints” (v. 18c)
3. “**and** his incomparably great power for us who believe” (v. 19a)

The best manuscripts have “and” only before phrase 3,<sup>21</sup> which speaks of power. Thus, phrases 1 and 2 go together to summarize God’s goodness. (Phrase 2 is in apposition to phrase 1.) That refers to our “hope” as the sure goal to which God has called us. (In most passages hope means our present confidence in that future goal; cf. Heb. 11:1.) The New Testament always refers to the goal of our hope as future,<sup>22</sup> never as attained (e.g., Col. 1:5). It is sometimes expressed as Messiah’s return to establish His kingdom: “We wait for the blessed hope—the glorious appearing of our great God and Savior, Jesus Messiah” (Titus 2:13; cf. 2 Tim. 4:1, 8). Here in Ephesians 1:18c it is further defined as *riches or wealth we will inherit*. Note that this is the same inheritance **from** God already mentioned in verses 11 and 14.<sup>23</sup> The words “**in** the saints” should be “**among** the saints.” Acts 20:32 says the same thing with equivalent text and grammar: “give you an inheritance among all those who are sanctified.”<sup>24</sup>

If this interpretation of 1:18c is correct, many versions (including NIV and NASB) are misleading. They assume it labels the saints an inheritance **for** God, as the Old Testament sometimes called the nation Israel (see Exod. 34:9; Deut. 4:20; 9:26). But nowhere else does the New Testament use that metaphor, and it seems out of place here.

<sup>20</sup> The expression “heavenly realms,” used five times in Ephesians, reminds us that all lasting things are now centered in heaven. There Messiah sits exalted beside the Father and waits to rule. Because we are in union with Him, our real life and future hope are there. From there will God’s “eternal purpose” (3:11) be determined, including the final overthrow of spiritual enemies and eternal inheritance by the saints.

<sup>21</sup> Hoehner, *Ephesians*, 104.

<sup>22</sup> “Hope that is seen is no hope at all. Who hopes for what he already has? But if we **hope for what we do not yet have**, we wait for it patiently” (Rom. 8:24-25).

<sup>23</sup> “Riches of inheritance **from him**.” This understands “him” as source, just as “God” is source in “salvation **from God**” in Acts 28:28 (NET Bible, same Greek syntax).

<sup>24</sup> Other passages confirm this interpretation of Ephesians 1:18c. Acts 26:18 says the same thing in equivalent words: “so that they may receive...a place **among those who are sanctified** by faith in me [Jesus].” Colossians 1:12 says, “giving thanks to the Father, who has qualified you to share in the **inheritance of the saints in the kingdom of light**.” Ephesians 5:5 also refers to our “**inheritance in the kingdom** of Messiah.” Inheriting the kingdom or inheriting in it, is a common teaching in the New Testament (e.g., Gal. 5:21; James 2:5; 1 Peter 1:4, 5, 13; Rev. 11:18; 21:7). Messiah’s kingdom is not heaven in heaven but His coming eternal rule on earth (Luke 1:32-33).

Saints should also know God’s “incomparably great power” for them (phrase 3, v. 19a). It is the same power He used in exalting Messiah to the supreme position in this age and the coming age (v. 21).<sup>25</sup> Already He is “head over everything for the church, which is His body, the fullness of him who fills everything in every way” (v. 23).<sup>26</sup> How is His body His “fullness”? In the sense that He communicates His own Spirit to it; it is an extension of Him. In other words, not just the Head but the whole body, is Messiah. That is an essential fact in the revealed secret.

**Think it over!** Do I give witness that Jesus will rule over the whole world? that every believer has an eternal inheritance in Him? Do I often praise God for His grace in devising and carrying out such a plan? for arranging situations to prepare me for rulership?

*Ephesians 2 describes, especially in the case of Gentiles, the amazing transformation of those God chooses to join to Messiah to constitute Messiah’s body.*

**Ephesians 2:1-10.** This section describes God’s work of grace in the salvation of those He chooses. It pictures it in terms of raising the dead to life.

- He chooses them in spite of their miserable, abject, and helpless condition.
- He gives them life joined to the resurrected and ascended Messiah.
- He does this “in order that in the coming ages” He might enrich them in Messiah, as promised in chapter 1.
- He makes sure they will do (literally, walk in) the good works He has prepared for them.

**Ephesians 2:11-22.** This section discusses the corporate effect of God’s transforming grace—what happens to these saved ones *as a group*. They become Messiah’s one new body, the universal church. In it are included Gentiles such as the Ephesians, who were “far away” until Messiah made peace. Now they are as acceptable as Jews, who previously had all the spiritual advantages.<sup>27</sup> “But now in Messiah Jesus you who once were far away have been brought near

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<sup>25</sup> “not only in the present age but also in the one to come” (1:21). This was written many years after Jesus spoke of “this age [and] the one to come” (Matt. 12:32). The age to come (that of the everlasting kingdom) had still not come. Nevertheless, Jesus and the apostles had done “the miracles [literally] of the coming age” (Heb. 6:5).

<sup>26</sup> Ephesians 4:10 repeats the thought that He “fills everything”; He will “fill the whole universe.”

<sup>27</sup> Among Jewish advantages compared to Gentiles, 2:12 implies “Messiah...citizenship...covenants of the promise...hope...God.” There is a similar list in Romans 9:1-5 (cf. Rom. 3:1-2). Romans 11:16b-24 uses a graphic figure of speech to picture this Gentile inclusion with Israel. Gentiles are “cut out of an olive tree that is wild by nature, and contrary to nature [are] grafted into a cultivated olive tree.” Because God elected Israel, that is “their [Israel’s] own olive tree.”

through the blood [death] of Messiah” (2:13). He tore down “the barrier, the dividing wall of hostility” that kept Gentiles distanced from Jews and from God (2:14-16). How did He destroy that barrier, that hostility? By “abolishing in his flesh [in death] the law with its commandments and regulations” (cf. Gal. 2:19-21). Now believers from each category (from formerly far-away Gentiles and from nearby Jews) are joined in “one new man” that is reconciled to God (2:15b-18).

As seen previously (1:13-14), each member of this “new man” receives God’s Spirit.<sup>28</sup> Therefore, together they comprise a building in which God as Spirit dwells (2:19-22). This temple is founded on the persons and/or preaching of New Testament apostles and prophets (2:20). The cornerstone giving stability and dimensions is Messiah Himself. Dispensationalists wrongly believe that building this “new man”/church/temple is just a temporary process to be discontinued years before Jesus comes to rule.<sup>29</sup>

**Think it over!** Have I come to Messiah helpless and guilty to receive new life? Is there evidence His Spirit is transforming me? What difference does it make that I am now a member of His body, which will inherit everything?

*Ephesians 3 affirms Paul’s key function in promulgating this marvelous revealed secret about Messiah and His body—and records Paul’s prayer for believers to know Messiah.*

**Ephesians 3:1-13.** Here Paul is about to express another prayer for the Ephesians based on what he has been writing (3:1, “For this reason”). Before his prayer he pauses to enlarge on the “mystery” revealed to and preached by him and other New Testament “apostles and prophets” (3:2-6). Some interpreters restrict their definition of the revealed secret to what they think this passage in chapter 3 says. Actually, Paul has been talking about that subject since chapter 1 and does not add any definitive information here. Again he says (v. 6) that Gentiles, by believing the gospel (and thus drawing near to Israel, 2:13) become

- heirs *together* with Israel, [Greek adds “and,” showing that the next item is distinct, not appositional.]

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<sup>28</sup> Each one becomes part of the body when he is baptized in the Spirit (1 Cor. 12:12-13). The Baptizer is Messiah. This great work is emphasized in each Gospel (Matt. 3:11; Mark 1:8; Luke 3:16; John 1:33) and Acts 1:4-5. He began to do it on the Day of Pentecost (Acts 11:15-17). This baptizing means the same as giving us the Holy Spirit (the “seal” of Eph. 1:13-14). No one will enter or see the kingdom without being “born of the Spirit” (John 3:3-10). When “all Israel will be saved” (Rom. 11:26), Messiah will baptize them as well and add them to His body.

<sup>29</sup> Growing up as a Dispensationalist, I was told that the process of building the church will be completed—and the church will be raptured *and removed*—before the tribulation years begin. (See the “Tribulation Terms” chart on p. 37.) Then God will return to dealing with ethnic Israel under (some said) principles of the Mosaic law. See my [“Will the Church Go Through the Great Tribulation?”](#)

- members *together* of one body, and
- sharers *together* in the promise in Messiah Jesus.<sup>30</sup>

An NIV note for 3:6 comments on this triple use of the word (in Greek a prefix) meaning “together”:

The repetition of this word indicates the unique aspect of the mystery that was not previously known: the equality and mutuality that Gentiles had with Jews in the church, the one body. That Gentiles would turn to the God of Israel and be saved was prophesied in the OT (see Ro 15:9-12); that they would come into an organic unity with believing Jews on an equal footing was unexpected.

Don’t forget that the apostle is talking about Gentiles here, in relation to Israel (not vice versa). What will these Gentiles inherit? In what promise do they share? Since the text suggests nothing new, it must refer to what Israel had access to. Does sharing by Gentiles mean that Israel has been replaced or will lose the special honor the prophets promised? Not at all, as you will see. It is obvious that if two partners are “heirs together...members together...[and] sharers together,” each partner retains some identity.<sup>31</sup> No they don’t, say some, because in Messiah “there is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female” (Gal. 3:29). But that refers to being accepted in Him, not to a lack of distinctives or a lack of order.

So Paul’s privilege and responsibility was to apply this good news about Messiah primarily to Gentiles (Eph. 3:7-13; Gal. 2:7-9). His ministry marked God’s change to *a new divine procedure*, which Paul called “the administration of this mystery” (Eph. 3:9).<sup>32</sup> This opened wide the door to Gentiles, which would bring many millions into Messiah and change the course of history. It reveals “the manifold wisdom of God [even] to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly realms” (3:10-11). Paul had a special responsibility to make the new plan known. This did not

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<sup>30</sup> Hoehner (*Ephesians*, 445) translates “fellow heirs, fellow members of the body, and fellow participants of the promise....”

<sup>31</sup> Amillennialists think that “Israel” ceased to mean ethnic Israel and referred instead to the church. The term is used sixty-seven times in the New Testament. How often does it mean the church? *Not once!* though some wrongly cite Galatians 6:16. See “[Will God Eternally Bless Ethnic Israel? A Critique of ‘Replacement Theology’](#)” or Section B2 in “[The Kingdom Will Come As the Prophets Predicted: A Critique of Waltke’s Case for Amillennialism.](#)”

<sup>32</sup> “Administration” in 3:3, 9 translates Greek *oikonomia* (used also in the phrase “to be put into effect” in 1:10). Hoehner discusses the Greek word’s

two nuances: first, the position or office of an administrator; second, the activity of administrating.... [T]he emphasis in 1:10 is on the activity of the administrator, whereas the emphasis in 3:2 and 9 is on the arrangement or plan of the mystery. Here it could have the idea of strategy. Paul’s responsibility is to enlighten all as to what is the strategy or administration of the mystery. (*Ephesians*, 455-456)

just mean to preach the mystery, which was already “revealed by the Spirit to God’s holy apostles and prophets.” Instead, as I understand, it was to see that the new procedure would be followed properly.

Remember that the new body (the *ekklesia*) being formed in this new procedure had been foreseen quite dimly in Old Testament prophecies. Under “Definitions” reread “The Meaning of Church.”

**Ephesians 3:14-21.** Paul makes the prayer he started to make in verse 1. Since he has added no basically different information, he can again introduce the prayer with the very same words (3:14, “For this reason”). He wants his fellow-heirs in Messiah’s body to have an ever-stronger perception of Messiah and His matchless love and power (3:14-21).

**Think it over!** Do I often take time to study and meditate on such important biblical teachings as this? Am I learning more about Messiah? What does it mean that we have been brought near to Israel and inherit with Israel? What special share will Israel get?

## **Part II. Conduct of the Church (Duties, Spiritual Walk) chapters 4-6**

*Ephesians 4:1 to 6:18 tells how saints (all those joined to the body of Messiah) should live and should fight spiritually. In 6:19-24 the Epistle closes with personal matters.*

**Ephesians 4:1-16.** This section can be titled “Walk in Unity.” It gives the main motives, means, and goal for this walk. Verse 2 says that we should be humble, gentle, and patient. These attitudes can be called lowliness (not pride), meekness (not selfishness), and longsuffering (not anger). We “make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit” that He has created, which unity includes the seven elements of verses 4-6. We are helped to do so by the five kinds of leaders the victorious Messiah has given us (4:7-11). These leaders have the responsibility

to prepare God’s people for works of service so that the body of Messiah<sup>33</sup> may be built up...grow up into him who is the Head, that is, Messiah. From him the whole body... grows and builds itself up in love. (4:12-16)

So with proper motives all God’s people will be prepared and exercise their ministries, resulting in a growing and maturing body of Messiah. Leaders and disciples in every local church should be acutely aware of this process.

<sup>33</sup> In this section the “body” of Messiah is mentioned by that name in 4:12 and (twice in) 4:16.

**Ephesians 4:17 to 6:9.** This section applies to many relationships the exhortation to “live a life worthy.”<sup>34</sup> It especially contrasts the Christian walk to the old life, described in 4:17-19. In 4:20-24 it lists three factors in the process of transformation.<sup>35</sup> Then in 4:25 to 6:9 it applies new-life principles to some specific situations. That subsection concludes with a series of relationships in the family (5:22 to 6:9), addressing particularly wives, husbands, children, parents, slaves, and masters.

**Ephesians 6:10-18.** This section reminds us that the Christian walk is not easy but includes warfare against spiritual enemies. Paul lists six parts of the spiritual armor God gives each believer.

**Ephesians 6:19-24.** This section lists Paul’s own prayer requests, presents Tychicus, the bearer of the letter, and gives final greetings.

**Think it over!** In the body of Messiah (a) What are the seven elements of unity and their meanings (4:4-6)? (b) What is my special ministry?  
 In regard to spiritual warfare, (a) What evidence do I have of participating? (b) Do I wear the full armor?

### C. More Comments on Selected Passages

*Now we will further consider several passages. I will change the translation of musterion from “mystery” to its usual New Testament meaning, “revealed secret.” For each passage, I will (a) first quote it, in whole or in part, in a format that helps define the revealed secret, (b) then comment on its features and its relation to other Scriptures.*

#### **Ephesians 1:9-14**

9 [God] made known to us the **revealed secret of his will**  
 according to his good pleasure, which he purposed **in Messiah,**  
**10 to be put into effect when the times will have reached their fulfillment—**  
  
**to bring all things in heaven and on earth together**  
**under one head, even Messiah.**

<sup>34</sup> The key Greek word for “walk” appears twice in the first verse of this section (4:17).

<sup>35</sup> These transformational factors are not given as commands because they are already realities, as clearly seen in the parallel passage in Colossians 3:9-10. Yet, they refer to a process not yet complete, so we can cooperate with it. (Compare Rom. 6:4, 8, 11-13; 12:1-2.)

**11 In him we also have obtained an inheritance** [NASB],  
 having been predestined according to the plan of him  
 who works out everything in conformity with the purpose of his will....  
 .....  
 13-14 ...the promised Holy Spirit...is a deposit **guaranteeing our inheritance**  
 until the redemption of those who are God’s possession....

**Comments**

- “the revealed secret of his will” (1:9a). That probably means “revealed secret which is (embodies) God’s will.” (Note my change from “mystery” to “*revealed secret.*”)
- “to be put into effect when the times will have reached their fulfillment” (1:10a). Then, and not before, will this revealed secret (= God’s will) be accomplished. Until then Messiah “must remain in heaven until the time comes for God to restore everything, as he promised long ago through his holy prophets” (Acts 3:21). Jesus called that future epoch “the renewal of all things, when the Son of Man sits on his glorious throne” (Matt. 19:28-29). It is “his appearing and his kingdom” (2 Tim. 4:1) we believers are all still waiting for.
- “to bring all things in heaven and on earth together under one head, even Messiah” (Eph. 1:10b). This also describes the restoration/renewal/kingdom I just referred to. Nothing will be exempt from Messiah’s rule. As Paul says it in Ephesians 4:9-10, “He who descended is the very one who ascended higher than all the heavens, *in order to fill the whole universe.*” This does not mean that every individual will eventually be saved. Some will not, but neither will they exist forever.<sup>36</sup>
- “all things in heaven and on earth together under...Messiah” (1:10b). Since He will rule over everything, what happened to God’s plan for mankind to rule?
  - “Let us make man... and let them rule...over all the earth.” (Gen. 1:26-28)
  - “You made him ruler over the works of your hands; you put everything under his feet; all flocks and herds...” (Psalm 8:4-8; quoted in Heb. 2:5-8)
  - “His servants...will reign for ever and ever.” (Rev. 22:3-5)

How will we rule if the Ruler is Messiah? We will rule “in Him,” as Paul implies throughout the epistle. This was foreseen, though not explained, in Daniel’s vision that began with “four great beasts” representing “four kingdoms” and reaching to the tribulation period (Dan. 7:3, 17, 24-25; see the “Tribulation Terms” chart on p. 38). Well into the fourth beast’s activities, “thrones were set in place” in a heavenly court (7:9). There “one like a *son of man*... approached the Ancient of Days” and “was given authority” over “all peoples” in an “everlasting dominion” (7:13-14). But in the explanation “the sovereignty, power and greatness of

<sup>36</sup> Immortality is not for all. “To those who...seek...immortality, he will give eternal life” (Rom. 2:7). See my writing “[Does the Bible Teach that All Men Are Immortal?](#)”

the kingdoms under the whole heaven will be handed over to *the saints*, the people of the Most High” (7:26-27). Thus, the final ruler (“son of man”) will not be just one person but will include all His people (“the saints”)!

- “In Him we also have obtained an inheritance” (Eph. 1:11a, NASB). That means that each believer is in Messiah and thus has a meaningful future. It will be “an inheritance in the kingdom of Messiah and God” (Eph. 5:5; cf. Matt. 25:34; Rev. 11:18). The final description of the “new heaven and new earth” includes the same promise: “he who overcomes will inherit all this” (Rev. 21:1, 7). “All things are yours” (1 Cor. 3:21). Not as isolated individuals but a “glorious inheritance...among the saints” (Eph. 1:18c). Yet, each person will get the share suitable for him (Luke 19:15-26).<sup>37</sup>
- The “Holy Spirit...is a deposit guaranteeing our inheritance until the redemption of those who are God’s possession” (Eph. 1:13-14). The Spirit’s presence in us (transforming us) gives us sure hope of such a future. Our future is guaranteed if we are in Him, members of His body.<sup>38</sup> We will not inherit “until the redemption” (1:14), which means “the redemption of our bodies” at our resurrection (Rom. 8:24).<sup>39</sup>

### Ephesians 1:18-23

18 I pray...that you may know

**the hope to which [God] has called you  
the riches of the glorious inheritance [He will give] among the saints.**

19 and his incomparably great power for us...

20 which he exerted in Messiah when he raised him and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly realms, 21 far above all rule and authority [and everything else] not only in the present age but also in **the one to come**. 22 And God placed **all things under his feet**, and appointed him to be **head over** everything for **the church**, 23 which is **his body, the fullness of him** who fills everything in every way.

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<sup>37</sup> We will never be just numbers in a grand total. Each one was chosen (Eph. 1:4), was predestined (1:5), received special grace (4:7), and has a special part in building up the church (4:16). Each will have his own special importance for ever. Each is an overcomer, promised “a new name...known only to him who receives it” (Rev. 2:17).

<sup>38</sup> In God’s plan the coming chief Heir first had to descend and live as one of us (Heb. 2:9-10, 14, 17). This was in order to bring “many sons to glory [as] the author of their salvation.”

<sup>39</sup> Romans 8 pictures us as God’s children waiting to become His sons. “Now if we are children, then we are heirs” (8:16-17, meaning, sure to inherit). But “our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us” (8:18). We “who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as **we wait eagerly for our adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies**. For in this hope we were saved...” (8:23-24).

## Comments

- “the **hope** to which [God] has called you, the riches of the **glorious inheritance** [He will give] among the saints” (1:18). This “hope” and “glorious inheritance” are the same thing. Titus 3:7 says it in a slightly different way: God’s purpose was that “having been justified by his grace, we might become **heirs** having the **hope** of eternal life.”
- God seated Messiah “far above all rule and authority...not only in the present age but also in **the one to come**” (1:21). This describes His authority at God’s right hand. Legal authority but obviously not fully exercised, at least until the coming age has come. That is when “the times will have reached their fulfillment,” He will inherit everything, and we will inherit in Him (1:10-11). As Hebrews 10:12-13 explains it, “he sat down at the right hand of God. *Since that time he waits* for his enemies to be made his footstool.” He is already the designated “ruler of the kings of the earth” (Rev. 1:5), but He has not yet come back to rule (Rev. 19:15). In that respect we also wait, “we wait for [God’s] Son from heaven” (1 Thess. 1:10). “There is another king,” we preach, “one called Jesus” (Acts 17:7). Yet, His “kingdom is from another place,” not from this world (John 18:36). Therefore, we cannot establish it but only tell people to prepare for it.
- “God placed all things under his feet” (1:22a). Again, this is legal, not yet factual. Hebrews 2:8 quotes the same words from the same Psalm (8), then comments: “Yet at present we do not see everything subject to him.”
- “the church, which is his body, the fullness of him” (1:22b-23a). Here the apostle introduces a figure of speech that he will echo repeatedly: The exalted Messiah is the Head, and the church is His body, which will inherit with Him.<sup>40</sup> His body is His “fullness” because it shares His Spirit and extends His life and power. From this perspective Messiah is not one individual but both Head and body!<sup>41</sup> The coming glory for the Head will also be glory for the body.

Galatians 3:29 says the same thing: “If you belong to Messiah, then you are Abraham’s seed, and heirs according to the promise.”<sup>42</sup> Colossians 3:1-4 teaches that our solidarity with the ascended Messiah is such that our real life will not appear until He does. See also 1 John 3:2.

<sup>40</sup> Messiah’s “body” is so-called in 1:23; 2:16; 3:6; 4:4, 12, 16, 16; 5:23, 30.

<sup>41</sup> No one can inherit the kingdom without being born of the Spirit (John 3:5, 8), which joins him to Messiah. Therefore, all saints of all nations and all history will become members of Messiah’s body.

<sup>42</sup> In Galatians 3 the apostle argues for an unexpected meaning of a collective noun. That noun, *seed*, is singular in form but normally plural in meaning. Abraham’s “seed”—the real heir to Abraham’s promises—was only “one... who is Messiah” (Gal. 3:16). (After the word *one*, translators added *person*, which was not in the original.) The law was in force only until that “one” came (3:17-19). But (like the collective word *seed*) He turns out to be *more than one person or one individual*. When we “were baptized into Messiah,” we “clothed [ourselves] with Messiah [and] are *all one in Messiah*” (3:26-28). Therefore, “If you belong to Messiah, then you are Abraham’s seed, and heirs according to the promise” (3:29).

**Ephesians 2:11-22**

11...remember that formerly **you who are Gentiles** by birth...

12...remember that **at that time you were**  
separate from **Messiah**,  
excluded from **citizenship** in Israel  
and foreigners to the **covenants of the promise**,  
without **hope** and without **God** in the world.

13 But now **in Messiah Jesus** you who once were far away  
**have been brought near through the blood of Messiah.**

14...**who has made the two one and has destroyed the barrier...**

15a by abolishing...the law....

15b...**to create in himself one new man out of the two....**

.....

19...**consequently, you are**  
**no longer foreigners and aliens,**  
**but fellow citizens with God’s people...**

.....

22...**a dwelling in which God lives by his Spirit.**

**Comments**

- “you who are Gentiles” (2:11). To believing Gentiles the apostle celebrates their solidarity with believing Israel and their future with that Israel. In 3:6 he will call this fact “the revealed secret...that...the Gentiles are heirs together with Israel.”
- “in Messiah Jesus you who once were far away have been brought near” (2:13). Here the apostle builds on the foundation he laid in 1:9-11. There he said that everything will be under Messiah (in His kingdom) and that believers will inherit their share as members of His body. Here he shows that believing Gentiles become part of that body without becoming Israelites.
- “through the blood of Messiah...has made the two one and has destroyed [Greek *lusas*] the barrier” (2:14). Until Messiah’s death an impassible barrier between Gentiles and Israel kept Gentiles away from Israel’s spiritual advantages. That barrier was created by God’s law given at Mt. Sinai. But Jesus’ death abolished the law or rendered it inoperative (2:15a). That “destroyed the barrier” and allowed us to participate by faith in Him.
- “by *abolishing* [Greek *katargesas*] ...the law” (2:15a). By this means God “destroyed the barrier,” facilitating the salvation of Gentiles. Does this mean that the law given through Moses is completely discarded? Hoehner objects to that translation: “The law was not put to

death or destroyed,” he says, “but has been *rendered inoperative or nullified* for the believer.”<sup>43</sup>

The day will come when “all Israel will be saved” (Rom. 11:26). Will God at that time revert to this hostility/barrier of the law? It seems impossible. How could He revert

- when “a change of the priesthood” has required “a change of the law” (Heb. 7:12; cf. 8:13)?
- when no law “could impart life” or grant righteousness (Gal. 3:21)?
- when the law was a “*pedagogue*” (guardian for children) only until Messiah came; but now “we are no longer under the supervision of the law” (Gal. 3:24-25; cf. Rom. 6:13-18)?
- when in Messiah we “died to the law...in order that we might bear fruit to God” (Rom. 7:4; cf. Gal. 2:19)?

Yet, changing the law does not invalidate its moral standards. All repentant people “hunger and thirst for righteousness” such as the law portrays—and they “will be filled” (Matt. 5:6). In fact, “the righteous requirements of the law [are] fully met in us, who...live...according to the Spirit” (Rom. 8:4). The Spirit is writing God’s laws on our hearts (Heb. 8:10; cf. 2 Cor. 3:3, 18).

- Believing Gentiles “have been brought near” (Eph. 2:13b). Near to what? To the things they were far from before, such as, the “covenants of promise.” Every such covenant was given for or predicted for Israel; there was no hint of additional covenants for others. For example, one of the “better” things God has provided is our High Priest and the “superior” new covenant He mediates (Heb. 8:6). It is identified, by quoting Jeremiah 31, as the very covenant promised to Israel (8:8-13). But even before Israel gets converted, Gentiles are enjoying Israel’s covenant.
- “one new man...God’s people...a dwelling in which God lives” (Eph. 2:15b, 19, 22). These figures of speech all describe the same new creation. Gentiles are admitted on the same level and by the same means as Israelites, by faith in Messiah.

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<sup>43</sup> Hoehner (*Ephesians*, 374-375). The verb translated “abolishing” in Ephesians 2:15a is from *katargeo*, used twenty-seven times in the New Testament. Nearly all of these are by the apostle Paul. Hoehner claims that Paul always uses it to mean “render inoperative, nullify, invalidate” rather than “abolish” or “destroy.” Many think otherwise, that it often does mean “abolish.” See my writing (in process) “Must Christians Keep the Law?”

### **Ephesians 3:2-11**

- 2 ...the **administration of God’s grace**  
that was given to me for you,  
3 that is, **the revealed secret**  
made known to me by revelation  
as I have already written briefly  
4 ...**the revealed secret of Messiah**  
5 ...not made known to men in other generations  
as it has now been revealed  
by the Spirit to God’s holy apostles and prophets.

6 **This revealed secret is**

**that through the gospel the Gentiles are**  
*heirs together with Israel,*  
*members together of one body,*  
*and sharers together in the promise in Messiah Jesus.*

- 7 I became a servant of **this gospel** [good news] by the gift of God’s grace...  
8 ...to preach to the Gentiles **the unsearchable riches of Messiah,**  
9 and to make plain to everyone the **administration of this revealed secret,**  
which for ages past **was kept hidden in God....**

- 10 His intent was that now, through **the church,**  
the manifold wisdom of God should be made known  
to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly realms,  
11 according to his eternal purpose which he accomplished  
**in Messiah Jesus our Lord.**

### **Comments**

- “the administration of God’s grace,” “administration of this revealed secret” (3:2a, 9a). You saw under 3:1-13 in the Survey that this referred to Paul’s special responsibility. He led in implementing God’s *new divine procedure* that would change history. For the first time many millions of Gentiles could be saved by flocking to Messiah. See comments below under 3:3a.
- “given to me for you” (3:2b). The apostle is still writing for “you who are Gentiles by birth,” as in 2:11. But though Gentiles have new freedom to enter the door, it opens to the same goal God always planned, the kingdom.
- “the revealed secret...the revealed secret of Messiah” (3:3a, 4). In 1:9 he had identified it with a modifier: “the revealed secret *of [God’s] will.*” In 3:4 he uses a different modifier: “the revealed secret *of Messiah.*” In 3:3a, however, he uses no modifier. He does not have to

specify because in Ephesians he discusses only one secret, with various aspects. Above all it is “the revealed secret of Messiah,” equivalent to “the unsearchable riches of Messiah” (3:8). Colossians 2:2 means the same: “the revealed secret of God, namely, Messiah.” Paul *never* calls it “the revealed secret of the church.” (Charles Ryrie acknowledges this, yet insists the church was previously a secret. See Section D.) Despite the church’s key role, the secret is primarily about Messiah.

- “as I have already written briefly” (3:3b). Where? In the previous chapters. In 1:9-11 he said that the secret of God’s purpose (a) is to bring all things together under Messiah and (b) will be fulfilled in Him as Head and body. In 2:11-22 he sketched how the new plan affects Gentiles. In Messiah Gentiles have drawn near to the advantages formerly exclusive to Israel (including Israel’s “covenants of the promise”).
- “the revealed secret made known to me by revelation” (3:3a). From this some wrongly infer that only the apostle Paul really knew this secret and preached it. Instead, “it has now been revealed by the Spirit to God’s holy apostles and prophets” (3:5b).<sup>44</sup> Did the others besides Paul perchance fail to pass the secret on in their preaching and writing? Of course not. Through them “the mystery...is now disclosed to the saints” (Col. 1:26). That means “to everyone” who believes (Eph. 3:9). Accordingly, Paul here (3:7) and in 6:19-20 calls it “this gospel (good news),” which he and others preached (as foundation of the church). Those others didn’t call it a revealed secret but wrote about it nevertheless. They used different figures of speech—not the Head and His body but the Son and His house (Heb. 3-4) or the Shepherd and His sheep (John 10, 1 Peter 5). Yet it was the same grand secret/gospel producing the same kind of saints!

Since others also learned and taught this secret, why did Paul emphasize that he got it straight from God? To authenticate his crucial “administration of [divine procedure of dispensing] God’s grace” for Gentiles (3:2). Paul showed the same concern and argument when defending his message to Gentile Galatians. “The gospel I preached,” he claimed, “I did not receive ...from any man...rather, I received it by revelation from Jesus Messiah” (Gal. 1:11-12). What he “received” was not completely new to him; it was the same “faith he once tried to destroy” (Gal. 1:23). It was for Gentiles the same gospel Peter preached to Jews (Gal. 2:7-8).

- “I became a servant [Greek *diakonos*] of this gospel [good news]” (3:7). This was no side-line but the central activity of Paul’s whole new life.
- This “revealed secret of Messiah...*was not made known* to men in other generations....For ages past [it] was *kept hidden* in God” (3:5, 9). How could the apostle say this when there were various well-known Old Testament prophecies about Messiah? It is because the information about Him in those prophecies, though important, was only sketchy and often shadowy. They revealed His existence but little about His character.

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<sup>44</sup> This is the second time in Ephesians that Paul refers to New Testament apostles and prophets as a foundation for what we believe (see Eph. 2:19-22).

- “This revealed secret is that through the gospel the Gentiles are heirs together with Israel, members together of one body...” (3:6). This is a key fact about Messiah’s character—but revealed in no Old Testament prophecy. His body (the church) is composed of Gentiles as well as Jews, who will all inherit the coming kingdom. Paul had already taught this in Ephesians 1:11, 14, 18; and 2:11-19 (cf. 5:5). He implied the same inclusion when he defined the revealed secret in Colossians 1:27: “God has chosen to make known among the Gentiles the glorious riches of this revealed secret, *which is Messiah in you* [Gentiles], the hope of glory.” Though involving Jews and Gentiles, the revealed secret is still primarily about Messiah. No one can inherit except in Messiah, cleansed by His blood and endowed with His Spirit.
- “Gentiles are heirs together with Israel...and sharers together in the promise in Messiah Jesus” (3:6). What will these Gentiles inherit? In what promise do they share? Since the text suggests nothing new, it must refer to what Israel had, the kingdom that will be restored to them (see below). It is the same picture as in Romans 11: Gentiles are grafted into Israel’s tree, not a new tree.
- “heirs together with Israel” (3:6). Does this inclusion of Gentiles mean that the nation Israel has been replaced? that it has no separate future in God’s plans? No, it does not mean that. Messiah’s kingdom assembly (the *ekklesia*) will include various nations (Rev. 21:24, 26; 22:2), each with its own share of the inheritance. If they had nothing distinctive, they would no longer be nations! Likewise with Israel. “All Israel will be saved, as it is written” (Rom. 11:26).

We have no right to think that God has canceled His unfulfilled promises to that nation. Nor did the apostles think so just before the Lord ascended: “Lord, are you at this time going to restore the kingdom to Israel?” (Acts 1:6). They asked this after He “appeared to them over a period of forty days and spoke about the kingdom of God” (Acts 1:3). Had they really understood? Of course, because He “opened their minds so that they could understand the Scriptures” (Luke 24:45). His answer to them in Acts 1:7-8 assumed that the kingdom would be restored to Israel. Israel will be honored as the prophets promised.

- “His intent was that now, through the church, the manifold wisdom of God should be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly realms” (Eph. 3:10). This newly revealed secret about Messiah and His body is amazing. Even to angelic spiritual authorities, seeing God’s process unfold continually demonstrates God’s wisdom. Don’t miss this. God keeps making poor and guilty sinners into sons like Messiah, who will inherit with Him!

Peter draws our attention to the same “inheritance...kept in heaven for you...salvation that is ready to be revealed in the last time ...glory and honor when Jesus Messiah is revealed...sufferings of Messiah and the glory that would follow.” That coming inheritance/salvation /glory/honor will be so great that “even angels long to look into these things” (1 Peter 1:3-12).

**Ephesians 4:15-16**

15 Instead, speaking the truth in love,  
we will in all things **grow up into him that is the Head, that is, Messiah.**

16 **From him the whole body,**  
joined and held together by every supporting ligament,  
grows and **builds itself up in love**, as each part does its work.

**Comments**

Ephesians 4:15-16 pictures the process of growth and health for the Messiah who is Head and body, discussed in this epistle. “Each part” of “the whole body” speaks or shows “the truth” (the real state of affairs) “in love” (for the sake of others). Jesus is “the Head” *into* whom as standard we the body “grow up.” Although “each part does its work” in building up the body, it is all “from him” as source.

**Ephesians 5:23-24, 30-32**

23 For the husband is the head of the wife,  
as Messiah is the head of the church,  
his body, of which he is the Savior.

24 Now as the church submits to Messiah,  
so also wives should submit to their husbands in everything.

.....  
30 For we are members of his body....

31“...the two will become one flesh.”

32 This is a profound mystery—  
but I am talking about Messiah and the church.

**Comments**

Ephesians 5:23-24 and 30-32 show that God pictured Messiah and His body, the church, even when He invented marriage. The husband represents Messiah, the Head who leads and saves; the wife represents the submissive church. Notice, however, that the church is not pictured here as a bride waiting for marriage—but as already “members of his body” (v. 30). There are variations on this theme in various Scriptures, such as, Matthew 25:1-13; John 3:29-30; Romans 7:1-4; 2 Corinthians 11:2; Revelation 19:7-9; 21:2, 9-10.

### **Ephesians 6:19-20**

19 Pray also for me, that whenever I open my mouth,  
words may be given me so that I will fearlessly make known

**the revealed secret of the gospel**

20 for which I am an ambassador in chains.  
Pray that I may declare it fearlessly, as I should.

### **Comments**

- Here the revealed secret is the gospel (good news) itself, as we saw in 3:7. It is what Paul preaches whenever he opens his mouth—and the cause of his imprisonment. Therefore, it is not an esoteric or specialized teaching designed for a special group, such as, mature Christians, but for everyone.
- There is no evidence that this revealed secret is different from the one in chapters 1 and 3. Therefore, we are seeing aspects of it every time we read the Gospels or the Epistles. It is what all the apostles and prophets were preaching.

## **D. The Church Was Not the Mystery**

*This long section deals with an issue that deeply affects one’s understanding of the church and related doctrines. I critique the view, mostly as defended by Charles C. Ryrie, that the church itself was a mystery revealed in the New Testament.<sup>45</sup> For the use of “Tribulation Terms” see my chart on p. 38. Church capitalized and church lowercased mean the same.*

I grew up as a traditional Dispensationalist and have high regard for such teachers. They advocate normal (usually literal) meanings of Bible prophecies. Thus, they are premillennial, believing that Jesus will reign as promised when He returns. They recognize that in “mysteries” Jesus revealed to His followers that His kingdom as predicted would not begin at His first coming but later.<sup>46</sup> Only when He “comes in his glory...he will sit on his throne in heavenly glory” (Matt.

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<sup>45</sup> Long-time dispensational spokesman, Ryrie was one of my esteemed teachers at Dallas Theological Seminary. Here I mostly cite *The Basis of the Premillennial Faith* (New York: Loizeaux Brothers, 1953), his published doctoral dissertation. I later used some of his books (such as, *Revelation*) as texts for correspondence school students in missions countries. I still often consult *The Ryrie Study Bible*. In 1966 he published *Dispensationalism Today* and in 1995 its “revised and expanded” version, *Dispensationalism* (Chicago: Moody Press).

<sup>46</sup> The predicted and expected kingdom seemed to be “postponed.” That was only from man’s perspective, however, not God’s. God planned, spoke, and acted in such a way that Israel would have a clear choice to accept Messiah and the kingdom. Most Dispensationalists believe the “mysteries of the kingdom” describe a current spir-

25:31). “At the end of the age” He will set up His “kingdom” in which “the righteous will shine like the sun” (Matt. 13:36-43). When He thus “sits on his glorious throne,” He will engineer “the renewal of all things” (Matt. 19:28) as previous prophets predicted. Then God will fulfill in their original meanings His promises to the nation Israel. He will redeem Israel and bless them as He said. Meanwhile, Jesus “sits...at the right hand of God [and] waits for his enemies to be made his footstool” (Heb. 10:12-13). Starting at the Day of Pentecost, Jesus is building His church while He waits to rule.

**A Severe Contrast.** I grew up with the views just mentioned and still consider them biblical. However, our teachers also constantly contrasted Israel and the church. For example, they said

- the church’s hope is heavenly but Israel’s hope is earthly (the kingdom on earth).
- the church—*but not Israel*—is the body of Christ and will become His bride and rule with Him.
- the church was a complete secret (“mystery”), with no organic relation to Israel.

This sharp church/Israel separation is a pillar of Dispensationalism. Ryrie shows why he considers it important in his chapter in *Basis...* about the church:

The main point in question is whether or not the Church is a distinct body in this present age. In brief, premillennialism with a dispensational view recognizes the Church as a distinct entity, distinct from Israel in her beginning, in her relation to this age, and in her promises. If...not, then the door is open wide for amillennialism to enter with its ideas that the Church is some sort of full-bloomed development of Judaism and the fulfiller of Israel’s promises of blessing (but not of judgment).<sup>47</sup>

In other words, Ryrie believes that considering the church a revealed mystery unrelated to Israel protects the real meanings of prophecies. If the church has merged with Israel, says Ryrie, Israel’s promises are being fulfilled “spiritually.” But if the church is not a new Israel, those promises can mean what they say and will be literally fulfilled. Later (at “Ryrie’s Evidence for Contrasting...”) I will consider Ryrie’s arguments for completely isolating the church from Israel. But first I will sketch some problems the dispensational view caused for us in my early years. Most important, it tended to downgrade New Testament books considered truth for Israel but not wholly “church truth.”

**Distrust of Matthew.** We called it “rightly dividing” the Word. We thought that Matthew’s emphasis on Israel disqualifies much of that Gospel for the church. Matthew says Jesus “was

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itual form of it: unexpected, unpredicted, and temporary. Others believe (as I do) that the present preparations are His kingdom only in embryonic form.

<sup>47</sup> Ryrie, *The Basis of the Premillennial Faith*, 126. All my quotations of that book in this section are from Chapter 7, “Its Basis in Ecclesiology [church doctrine]” (126-138). Ryrie was giving the basis for Premillennialism in ways that favored Dispensationalism.

sent only to the lost sheep of Israel” (Matt. 15:24) and sent His apostles only to them (10:5-6). That was necessary. Since Israel was the center of many prophecies of God’s promised kingdom on earth, they had to be ready for it. But they would not repent. They rejected the King, as the prophets had also anticipated. In that way they rejected the kingdom, which then got “post-poned.” But the prophets also predicted Israel’s future restoration. It did not get replaced by the church Jesus promised to build. We mostly understood the role of Israel but came to wrong conclusions about the church. We concluded that the promised kingdom is not the church’s heavenly hope and that much of Matthew—even the Sermon on the Mount—is not church truth.<sup>48</sup>

**Distrust Even the Sermon on the Mount?** In that most complete compendium of Jesus’ teaching, we could find no gospel and hardly any “grace.” Let me give, in Walvoord’s words, one example of a seeming contradiction to “church truth” we often pointed out. Walvoord notes that in the Sermon “forgiveness is sought, assuming that the petitioner also forgives, although the reverse order is observed in the epistles; that is, we should forgive because we are already forgiven.”<sup>49</sup> By considering these rules contradictory, we interpreted the Sermon as lacking God’s grace. If so, some of us wondered why the Great Commission said to “make disciples of all nations... teaching them to **obey everything** I have commanded you” (Matt. 28:20). Why “obey everything” from a book designed mostly for Israel? Many of us distrusted James too, who constantly echoed that Sermon when writing to “the twelve tribes”!

Many Dispensationalists seem unaware that their system requires such reticence about Matthew and the Sermon. But Ryrie continues to extend those warnings in his later writings. An example is his “Addendum: The Sermon on the Mount” (pp. 96-101) in *Dispensationalism*. He argues that the Sermon cannot be “interpreted *for* the church” but can be “applied *to* the church” whenever it fits (p. 99). Reread the Lord’s Sermon in Matthew 5-7 (start at 4:17); then consider the following negative assertions Ryrie makes about it.

- It never states “the Christian gospel,” giving no invitation “to believe that Jesus Christ died for our sins and rose again.” If it were presenting the gospel, he says, it would be a “works-salvation gospel.” Instead of the gospel it requires “the Jewish people...to repent... about their disobedience to...the law of Moses...with a view to...entering the kingdom of heaven, which was at hand...” (p. 97).

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<sup>48</sup> Accordingly, I used to discount some arguments based on Matthew. Now I get the same treatment from those who still hold my former beliefs.

<sup>49</sup> John F. Walvoord, *Matthew: Thy Kingdom Come* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1974), 53. Walvoord tries to explain the requirement in Matthew 6:14-15 and 18:32-35 as simply “family relationship” (p. 53). “The penalties [of jail, torture, and paying all the debt] refer,” he thinks, “to this life rather than the life to come” (p. 140). Instead, they seem to be eternal penalties; and willingness to pardon others is a clear sign of new life. Accordingly, James 2:13 says, “judgment will be merciless to one who has shown no mercy.”

- It lacks “church truth...does not mention the Holy Spirit once or the church per se or prayer in the name of Christ” (p. 101).<sup>50</sup>
- It is largely unsuited to this age even though it has some “ethical principles...binding on believers today” (p. 101). “If the laws of the Sermon are to be obeyed today,” says Ryrie, “I know of no one who interprets them in a consistently literal manner, let alone obeys them that way. Every businessman and all Christian schools would go bankrupt if they gave to all who asked anything of them (Matt. 5:42)” (p. 98).
- It has *elements that will not be true* in the millennium. For example, (a) it tells believers to pray, “Thy kingdom come”; (b) it predicts that righteous people will be persecuted (p. 99).

For the church, then, Ryrie believes that the Sermon can only be *applied*. It can be *interpreted* only for (“*relates*” only to) Israel, only in the three following periods. Ryrie calls the first two periods “*any time the Messianic kingdom is offered.*” The third (and substantial) period is the kingdom, in spite of the Sermon’s non-kingdom elements. Clarifications in brackets are mine.

1. “during our Lord’s earthly ministry”  
[that is, for about **three years** just before “the church age” began]
2. “during the coming tribulation period”  
[that is, for about **seven years** right after “the church age” supposedly ends]
3. “*the time when the kingdom is functioning on this earth*”  
[that is, just during the **thousand years** to which Ryrie limits the kingdom]<sup>51</sup> (pp. 99-100)

Consider what this means about the Sermon, Jesus’ main teaching in Matthew. Ryrie denies that it will ever relate *directly* to the church. He says it does not contain the gospel that can save us and that some of its laws cannot work now. The kingdom it refers to is Israel’s concern more, he thinks, than ours. Like much of the Gospel that contains this Sermon, it is not mainly church truth but designed for Israel.

John Walvoord makes some of the same denials and kingdom references in his commentary on Matthew. It “is plainly not the intent of this message [the Sermon],” he says, to delineate the gospel or present justification by faith or “point an unbeliever to salvation in Christ.” Instead, it is “a comprehensive statement of the moral principles relating to the kingdom which Jesus proclaimed” (p. 43). That is “the earthly kingdom predicted in the Old Testament....Because of

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<sup>50</sup> As usual, it is risky to argue from silence. Non-mention of the Holy Spirit or the church does not disqualify the Lord’s Sermon for us. The Spirit is not mentioned in Titus, Philemon, 2 Peter, 2 John, or 3 John either! Yet, only through Him can anyone attain the described righteousness—not by calling on the Spirit but by confiding in Christ. (See this implied by comparing Matt. 7:11 to its parallel in Luke 11:9-13.) Furthermore, entire books written for the church (such as, Mark, Luke, and John) do not mention the church!

<sup>51</sup> Ryrie decides this Sermon will be valid during “the kingdom” despite contrary evidence he has presented and not refuted. He also assumes that during the kingdom no external laws, including these, will apply to the church.

[Jewish] neglect of the spiritual and moral principles involved [in that “millennial kingdom”], Christ necessarily emphasized these...” (p. 45). Nevertheless, he adds that the Sermon cannot be all “eschatological, that is, applying to the future millennial kingdom but having no bearing upon the present church age....[I]t would hardly be fitting for Matthew... many years after the death of Christ, to introduce material which would be irrelevant to his contemporaries” (p. 44).

Notice Walvoord’s dilemma: to interpret the principles in the Sermon as designed for the “millennial kingdom” and yet as relevant to “contemporaries.” So how does he show their relevance? In this way:

- By showing that some elements are always valid. “Proceeding as they do from the nature of God and nature of morality and spiritual truth, many of the statements of Christ in the Sermon on the Mount are general in character.” He analyzes several of them, in each case “determining its general meaning, its present application, and its relation to the future kingdom program” (p. 46).
- By relating some of them to the supposed present form of the kingdom of heaven, the “contemporary spiritual kingdom” (p. 53). For example, discussing the Beatitudes he assumes they promise “reward in heaven *rather than* in the future millennial kingdom.” How does he justify finding non-kingdom rewards in this “earthly kingdom” document? “This is realistic, of course,” he explains, “because [the hearers] would ultimately move into the church with its heavenly destiny and reward” (p. 47, emphasis added).

So in spite of stating that the Sermon “as a whole, is not church truth precisely,” Walvoord uses techniques that relate nearly all of it to the present age. He mentions very little of its content that he does not try to relate to us.<sup>52</sup> This is in spite of his and Ryrie’s belief that the Sermon, and much else in Matthew’s Gospel, was more designed for Israel than the church. How strange that God would head up the church’s New Testament with such a book! When I was a Dispensationist, I did not think the gospel was presented clearly in any of the first three Gospels or the Book of Acts.<sup>53</sup> And I did not realize that the same kingdom to which Israel is key is also our hope.

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<sup>52</sup> Walvoord does point out some of the laws in the Sermon he thinks are less applicable now. For example, he thinks “not to swear at all” (5:34) will be fully valid only in the coming kingdom. It “should not be construed as completely prohibiting entering into a pledge or a promise in this age.” (Will it do so in the kingdom?) And he seems to agree with Ryrie that non-retaliation (5:38-42) is often too risky now. “What might work with the King present in the millennial kingdom might not work in the mystery form of the kingdom with the King absent” (pp. 50-51).

<sup>53</sup> Many evangelistic sermons are summarized in the Book of Acts. I used to wonder why not a one of them mentions the fact that the Lord died *for our sins* (though He did). And not one unambiguously mentions His deity, much less His pre-existence or His virgin birth! Instead, they emphasize His Messiahship, just as Matthew does. They are like the Synoptic Gospels rather than John’s Gospel, which I had preferred. Now I see that the Synoptic and Acts approach is basic but John is supplementary.

Especially confusing were the many schemes with different definitions of the kingdom (Scofield Bible gives six!) in different contexts. Analyzing its meaning in Matthew was my first big step out of Dispensationalism. I concluded that the kingdom there always means the reign promised to David and is the great hope for the church and the world.<sup>54</sup> Accepting Matthew and the Sermon as for this age led me to other changes, modifying, for example, my understanding of the gospel and saving faith.<sup>55</sup> Yet, our personal confusions and conclusions are inadequate bases for theology. So let us now consider

**Ryrie’s Evidence for Contrasting Israel and the Church.** We will consider Ryrie’s key issue. But first I will copy from his *Basis* (p. 127)—and give brief responses to— three steps under which he lists his evidence.

1. First, he affirms that “the Scriptures...allow for an interposition of this church age.”  
**My Response.** Indeed, there is room—and a need—to insert a period of time, the age we live in, into various prophecies. No previous prophet—not even John the Baptist—understood that the Messiah would come twice. Jesus revealed this unexpected age in His parables of the kingdom (Matt. 13). The issue we must consider here is its character.
2. Next he says, “it must be proved whether or not the designation of the Church as a mystery means that it was unknown to the Old Testament prophets.”  
**My Response.** Ryrie’s statement wrongly calls Jesus’ church (*ekklesia*) a mystery. No passage says it was; and the term had been often used in the Old Testament, even in predictions.
3. “Finally,” Ryrie concludes, “one must examine the teaching of the Scripture concerning the use of the word *church* to see if the Church is a distinct body in this age.”  
**My Response.** Agreed, we must weigh all the evidence.

If Old Testament prophecies really meant what they said, they did not predict this current age. Messiah came and fulfilled some prophecies but not most. He Himself predicted He would go away but return in glory. He also predicted He would build His church, which the “gates of Hades” (power of death) can never overcome (Matt. 16:18). Starting at Pentecost, from heaven He began building the church by baptizing in the Holy Spirit. But both He and we are still waiting for Him to return and rule. Several passages say He will come to join us, but not even one passage clearly says He will take us away. If not, where is there evidence that He will cease building the church before He comes to rule?

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<sup>54</sup> See my [“The Four Gospels: the Kingdom Offered & Postponed.”](#)

<sup>55</sup> A previous note refers to the gospel as summarized in Acts. I also see that saving faith always includes repentance and leads to obedience. The Beatitudes perfectly describe repentant people coming to Jesus for salvation. And the Lord’s new covenant (applied by the Spirit) will insure that they *will obey*. They “hunger and thirst for righteousness” and “will be filled” (Matt. 5:6; cf. 7:24-27).

**The Word for Church Was Well-known.** The main key to understanding an institution is in its founding. That is true in Jesus’ promise in Matthew 16:18 to build His church, His *ekklesia*. Reread my discussion of that term and that passage in Part A. Though Matthew in chapter 13 had called new revelations about the kingdom “mysteries” (revealed secrets), he did not so label the *ekklesia*. The term was not novel; the disciples knew its Scriptural background. It often referred to Israel as God’s *kingdom assembly* in the past (e.g., in Deut. 10:4) and sometimes to God’s future assembly (e.g., in Ps. 22:22, so quoted in Heb. 2:12). By using that term, Jesus implied it would be His own kingdom assembly, similar to ancient Israel. Nevertheless, Ryrie argues that it was a new concept.

**Ryrie’s Evidence that the Church Was a Mystery.** He correctly defines “mystery” as “a truth hidden in the Old Testament but now revealed in the New Testament” (see “The Meaning of Mystery” in Part A). He also admits that “the Church itself is never actually called a mystery in the New Testament.” “However,” he continues, “it is a mystery since its major elements are specifically designated as mysteries.” That is a non sequitur, because you can have major new revelations even about something well-known.<sup>56</sup> Nevertheless, I will list and discuss the four elements about the church that Ryrie says the Bible calls “mysteries.”<sup>57</sup> Elements 1 and 2 are ways in which the church is different from anything before. Elements 3 and 4 allege that God will treat the church as separate from Israel.

#### **Four Elements That Ryrie Claims Were Mysteries:**

1. The one body. This is also called the “new man” and consists of Gentiles as fellow heirs with Jews.
2. The organism. Christ indwells each believer.
3. The bride. Ryrie believes that only the church is Christ’s bride (Eph. 5). He claims that “the marriage recorded in Revelation 19:7-9” will take place before the tribulation.
4. The Rapture. Ryrie believes that God will rapture the church and take it to heaven before He again deals with Israel during the tribulation.

**Elements 1 and 2**, about Gentiles sharing divine life in the one new body, indeed had not been revealed in the Old Testament. But as you can see in Ephesians, neither element excludes Israel as Israel. Gentiles “have been brought near” to where Israel already was. The only “covenants of the promise” blessing the church are *the same ones He gave to Israel*. Those promises are not replaced but have unexpected elements added to their fulfillment. Gentiles will now be “heirs *together with* Israel, members *together* of one body, and sharers *together...*” (Eph. 3:6). The word *together* at least permits that Gentiles and Israel would still be distinguishable in the new

<sup>56</sup> “Mystery” elements of a given subject do not require that the subject itself was unforeseen. For example, “mysteries of the kingdom” were new revelations about the well-known kingdom.

<sup>57</sup> In Ryrie’s chapter about Ecclesiology, these are in Section II, “The Church, A Mystery” (pp. 130-135).

entity. Furthermore, what kind of salvation will Jews get when “all Israel will be saved”? John 3:5-10, referring to passages such as Ezekiel 36, shows that the most important features of Israel’s salvation will be like ours. Each person will be baptized in the Spirit (putting him into Christ’s body) and indwelt by that Spirit (of Christ).

*In the following discussion “the tribulation” is equivalent to “the seventieth week of Daniel” (Dan. 9:27; see the “Tribulation Terms” chart on p. 38). That is the period of seven years just before Christ comes back to rule. The Bible calls only the second half of that period “the (Great) Tribulation.”*

**Elements 3 and 4** both hinge on the time and character of the Rapture. Ryrie wants to prove that God will take the church out of the world before He resumes dealing with Israel. Many prophets did predict the tribulation, Israel’s conversion, and the glorious kingdom. But no prophecy, says Ryrie, pictures the church on earth during the tribulation. Revelation often refers to “saints” and converted Israelites at that time, none of which—insists Ryrie—are the church. Instead (based on his interpretation of John 14:1-3 and 1 Thess. 4:13-18), the Lord will come before the tribulation and take us to heaven. Thus He will save us from God’s wrath that will come on the earth—but will later bring us back in glory.<sup>58</sup>

When I interpreted that way, I did not realize how my deep desire to escape the tribulation influenced my reasoning. The Lord had promised one future coming, but I had split it into two. He repeatedly referred to coming back in glory to judge the world, set His saints apart, and rule with them. In the Olivet Discourse (Matt. 24-25, Mark 13, Luke 21) He described a great tribulation just before He comes again. And He gave that coming a rather technical title, Greek *parousia* (Matt. 24:29-31). Apostles later used the same term with the same meaning (e.g., 1 Cor. 15:23; 2 Peter 3:4, 12). In some passages, however, we convinced ourselves that it meant yet another coming (1 Thess. 4:15; 2 Thess. 2:1; 1 John 2:28), one before the tribulation. The new pretrib coming would be *for* the saints, to rapture us and take us away. But we still believed in the post-trib coming the Lord had predicted; we called only it the Second Coming. In it, we said, He will come *with* the saints, bringing us back to rule.

So we had made two *parousias* out of one. Yet, no passage mentions two future comings, and there is no distinct terminology to distinguish them. So we just learned to label each passage as Rapture or Second Coming according to what we saw in it. How hard it is to be objective when it comes to escaping the tribulation! I can only hope you will consider prayerfully all the Scriptural evidence about this matter, some of which is presented here and in the appendix.

**Element 3—the bride**, the saints *getting married* to Messiah. Ryrie claims that only the church is Christ’s bride, which must be completed, all moved to heaven, and “married” to Christ before God again deals with Israel in the tribulation. But though the marriage-to-God metaphor is used

<sup>58</sup> The rest of this Section D includes more discussion of possible Rapture passages. See also the appendix, my [Thessalonians](#) course, and—most broadly—[“Will the Church Go Through the Great Tribulation?”](#)

in both Testaments, no passage clearly fits Ryrie’s requirement. Every passage is different. In Ephesians 5:30, for example, the saints are pictured as *already married* to Christ: “we are members of his body.” That does not describe a prospective marriage (as in Jewish espousal) but one already consummated, (as in Gen. 2:24; cf. 1 Cor. 6:16). Romans 7:3-6 likewise pictures saints as *already married* to Christ. We “died to the law...that [we] might belong to another...in order that we might bear fruit to God.” In 2 Corinthians 11:2 the apostle speaks only to the Corinthian church: “I promised you to one husband, to Christ, so that I might present you as a pure virgin to him.”

**Revelation 19:6-9** does announce as ready the future wedding of the Lamb with His bride. But it does not help Ryrie’s case because this wedding will *still be future* at the end of the Great Tribulation. Therefore, the bride cannot represent a church supposedly snatched away to heaven years before. Except for the Two Witnesses in 11:11-12, no such snatching of a group is pictured anywhere in Revelation.<sup>59</sup> But since Ryrie leans heavily on Revelation 19:6-9, let us consider it in context. First, the passage is set at the end of the Great Tribulation.<sup>60</sup> It is the last of four *hallelujah*’s celebrating the just-finished punishment of wicked and cruel Babylon and the imminent coming of the Lord’s kingdom.<sup>61</sup> In it “what sounded like a great multitude” shouted,

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<sup>59</sup> In fact, the Bible nowhere pictures the church as *snatched up to heaven*. See the Appendix. Revelation once pictures an individual “snatched up to God”: namely, “the male child, who will rule all the nations” (12:5). That refers to Jesus’ ascension to sit at His Father’s right hand, where He still waits to return and rule. The Two Witnesses will also be raised and ascend. As John saw it, days after they were killed, “the breath of life from God entered them...and they went up to heaven in a cloud” (11:11). Their resurrection seems to imply their glorification. But Revelation pictures other groups that move from earth to heaven with no indication that they are glorified:

6:9 “those...slain because of the word of God and the testimony they had maintained”  
 7:9, 13 “a great multitude [coming] out of the great tribulation”  
 15:2-4 “those who had been victorious over the beast”

Another group ascends, however, which does seem glorified. In 14:1-4 John sees in heaven apparently the same 144,000 “from all the tribes of Israel” he had seen sealed in 7:4. Chapter 14 is just before the final bowl judgments (15:1), after this group has passed through most of the tribulation. Now John sees them “with the Lamb, standing on Mt. Zion...before the throne and before the four living creatures and the elders.” To indicate their glorified status, they are now called “firstfruits” (cf. 1 Cor. 15:23). Walvoord, however, does not believe that 14:1-4 pictures an event during the tribulation. He thinks it previews a later event “at the beginning of the millennial reign” (p. 214). Chapter 14 does have some previews (see vv. 11, 16, 19), but they are much more obvious than this.

<sup>60</sup> The Great Tribulation continues through the seventh/last bowl of God’s wrath (Rev. 16:17-21). That brings (a) the greatest earthquake in history and the plague of giant hailstones, (b) collapse of the world’s cities, and especially (c) the fall of Babylon the Great, described in apparently distinct stages in chapters 17 and 18. See my [“The Coming of Jesus’ Eternal Kingdom According to the Book of Revelation.”](#)

<sup>61</sup> The first three *hallelujah*’s emphasize that God “has condemned the great prostitute [Babylon] who corrupted the earth by her adulteries. He has avenged on her the blood of his servants” (19:2). After all four *hallelujah*’s is the climactic Second Coming to earth of the “KING OF KINGS AND LORD OF LORDS.” He destroys the enemy armies, disposes of the wicked leaders, raises dead saints to life, and begins to rule with them (19:11 to 20:4).

“Hallelujah!

For our Lord God Almighty reigns [the imminent kingdom].

Let us rejoice and be glad

and give him glory!

For the *wedding* [Greek *gamos*] of the Lamb has come [is imminent],

and his bride has made herself ready.

Fine linen bright and clean,

was given her to wear.”

(Fine linen stands for the righteous acts of the saints.)

Then the angel said to me, “Write: ‘Blessed are those who are invited to the *wedding supper* [again Greek *gamos*] of the Lamb!’” (Rev. 19:6b-9a)

This passage exults in the kingdom about to begin with the wedding of the King.<sup>62</sup> This wedding is represented as about to happen *at the end of the tribulation*. The wedding celebration *includes* the wedding supper; Greek *gamos* refers to both. So it is unconvincing to separate the wedding from the supper, in time and place, as John Walvoord does.<sup>63</sup>

Notice again that the bride who steps front and center is **in clear contrast to the wicked prostitute (Babylon)** just destroyed. She “has made herself ready” and put on “fine linen [which] stands for the righteous acts of *the saints*.” Which “saints”? Could they be saints not clearly mentioned in the book? Saints supposedly snatched from the earth years before in a Rapture not mentioned either? Or do they instead—and far more likely—include the many tribulation “saints” often referred to (e.g., Rev. 11:18; 13:7, 10)? Saints that all “overcame,” both Jews and Gentiles, many at the cost of their lives (12:11)?

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<sup>62</sup> The verb *reigns* in Revelation 19:6 is Greek aorist indicative (usually past) referring here to an imminent and certain event (“is about to reign”). Daniel B. Wallace discusses that usage in his *Greek Grammar Beyond the Basics: An Exegetical Syntax of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996), 563-564. He calls this use “Proleptic (Futuristic) Aorist.” In it “the aorist *indicative* can be used to describe an event that is not yet past as though it were already completed.” Among the illustrations Wallace gives is John 13:31: “Now the Son of Man **is glorified** and God **is glorified** in him.” In Revelation a similar usage to 19:6 is 11:15: “The kingdom of the world **has become** the kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ...” (Rev. 11:15). In both passages succeeding verses clearly refer to the future near to them.

<sup>63</sup> John F. Walvoord, *The Revelation*, 271. He argues that the Lamb will come for His bride before the tribulation period and take her to wed Him in heaven. (This is nowhere pictured in Revelation.) After the tribulation He will supposedly bring her back and celebrate the feast. The main evidence Walvoord cites to separate the wedding from its feast is that the bride is already called “wife” in Revelation 19:7:

Here... the bride is already the wife of the Lamb, that is, the bridegroom has already come for His bride prior to His second coming described in 19:11-16. That which is here announced is not the wedding union but the wedding feast... The third phase of the wedding is about to take place, namely, the feast, which presumes the earlier rapture of the bride.

Instead, “his bride [Greek for “wife”] has made herself ready” shows that the wedding is about to take place. The Greek calls her “wife” prospectively.

Walvoord says the bride cannot consist of all believers because she is mentioned separately from “those who are invited.” But even if they were separate, the bride would have to be some group current in the book. It is probable, however, that the bride and the guests are two ways of looking at the same people. The bride is also invited to the feast. This is implied in an equivalent figure used in both Testaments: The royal bride is the capital city, which includes all its inhabitants. For example, in Isaiah 54-55 the King marries his capital city and invites all to the feast.<sup>64</sup>

**The same picture** is in Revelation 21. John sees “the New Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride” (21:2) to be the eternal capital of the renewed earth. It is a real city, to which all believers will have access (21:24-27; Heb. 13:14). At the same time it is specifically called “the bride, the wife of the Lamb” (Rev. 21:9, 10). Since “on [its] gates were written the names of the twelve tribes of Israel” (21:12) and “on [the twelve foundations] were the names of the twelve apostles” (21:14), it represents all believers.<sup>65</sup> We can assume the same in the posttribulational wedding anticipated in Revelation 19. The bride consists of all believers, including the Jews and Gentiles saved during the tribulation. If so, it is no “mystery” church earlier removed from the scene.

**Element 4; 1 Corinthians 15:51-52.** Ryrie counts on this passage to prove “the end of the church age...before the tribulation.” He asserts that the Rapture it describes is pretribulational and includes snatching the saints into heaven. That clears the way, says Ryrie, for God to again deal with Israel.<sup>66</sup> Indeed, God will restore Israel; but that is no part of the discussion in this passage. Here the saints referred to (a) are transformed at Jesus’ return to rule and (b) stay on earth to rule with Him. Consider the passage in context.

This great chapter shows that God will finally triumph over death and prepare us for eternal inheritance by raising our bodies in glory. Verses 20-28 list the three stages in His victory:

<sup>64</sup> From my “[Isaiah](#) Study Guide” I copy: “Isaiah 54-55 pictures the LORD rebuilding His bridal city, Zion (ch. 54), and inviting everyone to His feast (ch. 55).” See also 62:4-5.

<sup>65</sup> As stated above, Walvoord argues that separate mention proves the bride and guests represent different groups at the wedding of the Lamb. “It is most significant...that those in the great multitude composed of tribulation saints should thus regard the wife of the Lamb as an entity other than themselves” (*Revelation*, pp. 270, 273). But he makes no attempt to harmonize this with the picture of the New Jerusalem descending to earth in Revelation 21. He even denies that the New Jerusalem represents the bride, though it is called that in 21:9, 10. “Since a city is not a bride nor a wife,” he argues, “the truth here represented is that the city, the residence of the saints of eternity future, is to be compared to a bride for beauty and is intimately related to Jesus Christ the Lamb” (p. 317).

<sup>66</sup> Ryrie thinks 1 Corinthians 15:51-52 “reveals how the Church will be taken out of the world before the seventieth week [of Daniel 9:24-27] begins....” He mentions the “seventieth week” because that is the final “week” (consisting of seven years) in that prophecy leading to Israel’s salvation. The first verse of the prophecy (9:24) limits its perspective to that nation: “seventy [weeks]...decreed for your [Daniel’s] people and your holy city [Jerusalem].” The tribulation is the second half of the seventieth week.

1. “Messiah...has been raised from the dead, the firstfruits...” (v. 20)
2. “In Messiah all will be made alive....*when he comes, those who belong to him...*” (vv. 22-23)
3. “Then the end will come...for he must reign until he has put all his enemies under his feet. The last enemy to be destroyed is death.” After He abolishes death completely, He “hands over the [perfected] kingdom to God the Father...” (vv. 24-28)

Verses 35-49 discuss “with what kind of body” we will rise. Then the grand climax (vv. 50-58) is introduced by verse 50 (which Ryrie does not mention): “Flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God, nor does the perishable inherit the imperishable.” After the resurrection we will no longer be “flesh and blood” nor “perishable.” Then we can *inherit our eternal shares in the kingdom*. Both the dead and the living must be so transformed: “We will not all sleep [in death], but we will all be changed...the dead will be raised, and we will be changed” (v. 51). All on the same occasion (see also 1 Thess. 4:13-18). When will that happen? Paul had no need to repeat the timing he had just indicated in verses 22-25 (see above). “Those who belong to him” will overcome death when the Lord comes to rule.<sup>67</sup>

In conclusion, though 1 Corinthians 15:51-52 describes the Rapture, it does not support some of the dispensational presuppositions. (a) Neither it nor its context refers to the nation Israel. (b) It does not take place before the tribulation period but when the Lord returns to rule. (b) It says nothing about believers going to heaven but about being prepared to inherit the kingdom on earth. That is the grand goal for all the saints, as the Body and Bride of the Lord.

CHART A				Tribulation Terms	
<b>Pretribulation</b>  <i>Pretrib. Rapture?</i>		<b>The Tribulation (Period)</b> Seventieth Week (“Seven”) of Daniel 9:26-27 7 years		<b>Posttribulation</b> <b>The Lord returns to rule.</b> <i>Posttrib. Rapture?</i>	
The Present Age		3 ½ years	The Great Tribulation 3 ½ years	The Age to Come  T H E   K I N G D O M	
			Daniel 7:24-25 Rev. 13:5		
P r e m i l l e n n i a l   e v e n t s				Millennium	

Theologians often call the whole seven years “the tribulation” (Greek *he thlipsis*). Instead, it is just the second half.

<sup>67</sup> Both passages (1 Cor. 15:23 and 15:51-52) refer to the occasion when saints will overcome death. The first passage specifically dates it at the Lord’s *parousia*; the second passage mentions the trumpet summoning the saints, which Matthew 24:31 relates to the *parousia*. Yet, Dispensationalists can call only the second passage the Rapture. For discussion of their reasons, see the Appendix.

## E. Final Conclusions about This Mystery

(Among bolded words are all those that translate Greek *mysterion*.  
Except as designated, references are to Ephesians.)

*“The **mystery** of Christ” is that Jesus is the Messiah,  
who will rule over the whole universe  
through those who receive His life and are thus joined to Him,  
whether they are Jews or Gentiles.*

- 1. Ephesians discusses one mystery.** That one “**mystery**” is described with several modifiers (or none): “*of Christ (Messiah)*” (3:4); “*of his [God’s] will*” (1:9); “*of the gospel*” (6:19); “*that...the Gentiles are heirs together with Israel*” (3:6). These all refer to the same “**secret made known**” (3:3), the usual biblical meaning of the word.
- 2. The mystery is Messiah.** “The **mystery** of Christ” means “the **revealed secret** which is Messiah.” *Christ/Messiah* is His royal title, meaning “the one anointed to be King.” Thus, the **secret** relates to Him as the promised King and to His promised kingdom. It fills out the sketchy Old Testament predictions (especially about His character and the full extent of His rule).
- 3. All the saints were taught this truth.** Only the apostle Paul called it a **secret**—and only in Ephesians and Colossians. However, it was revealed to all new covenant apostles and prophets, those who founded the church. It was revealed in order for all believers to know it. Other New Testament writers used different figures of speech from Paul but announced the same revelation. Their writings were church truth as much as his writings.
- 4. This revealed secret was the gospel (good news)** being preached by Paul and all other founders of the church. It is essentially the same as the main message in the Gospels and preached in Acts, that “Jesus is the Messiah” (e.g., John 20:31; Acts 5:42).
- 5. Its main point is Messiah’s ultimate rule with and through the saints.** The time and extent of His rule is stated at the heart of the doxology opening Ephesians:

*when the times will have reached their fulfillment—  
to bring all things...together under...Messiah (1:9-10)*

The next verses (1:11-14, 18) show that He will rule not as a solitary individual but with and through those in His “body.” Their hope, their goal, is eternal inheritance “in Him.” That is how God will fulfill the plan He revealed when He created mankind to rule.

- 6. This secret was not the church though it helps define the church.** Just as Messiah is royal, so the church is royal. (Old covenant Scriptures prefigured it as God’s kingdom assembly, His *ekklesia*.) It is composed of believers in Messiah (the One anointed to rule), all of whom He baptizes in God’s Spirit. This makes them (a) stones in God’s temple/dwelling and (b) living members of Messiah’s body. They are “His fullness” (1:21), through which He as Head will rule.

7. **The apostle Paul had special responsibility and authority in “the administration of this secret” (3:9).** In this *new divine procedure* God’s grace is dispensed to Gentiles equally with Jews:

God has chosen to make known among the Gentiles  
the glorious riches of this **revealed secret**,  
*which is Messiah in you* [Gentiles], the hope of glory. (Col. 1:27)

Paul showed the church how Gentiles can belong to God’s people and how to spread the message to them. He led in guiding mankind to and through God’s newly opened door.

8. **Believing Gentiles are now as acceptable as Israel.** In this “administration of God’s grace” (3:2), Gentiles have new access. Previously they were “without hope” and “far away” from the advantages of Israel, which was “near.” God’s holy law had kept the two groups separate. But Messiah’s death annulled that law and ratified the new covenant. Now acceptable in Messiah, Gentiles become “heirs together with Israel” (3:6). As pledge of that glorious future, they receive the Spirit. The promise to “baptize with the Holy Spirit” (Matt. 3:11) was for Israel (and has not been revoked); but believing Gentiles receive no less. When Jesus baptizes them, He joins them to His body equipped to help it grow and prosper.
9. **The “administration of this mystery” does not replace Israel**, as some think. The labels *Israel* and *Israelite* retain their ethnic meaning; we inherit *together*. “All Israel will be saved, as it is written” (Rom. 11:26), and will inherit its own special promises as part of the *ekklesia*. The gates of the eternal New Jerusalem will forever be named after the twelve tribes of Israel. Saved nations will forever be nations, with unique attributes.
10. **“His intent was that now, through the church, the manifold wisdom of God should be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly realms” (3:10).** Even angels marvel at God’s wisdom and power in the plan He is implementing (1 Pet. 1:12)! So should we. “How unsearchable His judgments and His paths beyond tracing out!”

Have you “turned to God from idols,  
to serve the living and true God,  
and to wait for His Son from heaven,  
whom he raised from the dead—Jesus,  
who rescues us from the coming wrath”?

If so, Messiah has baptized you into His body  
as a functioning member  
and assigned you a share in His eternal rule  
when He comes again.

## Appendix: Rapture Passages?

*Here is more discussion of the Lord's future coming and the gathering of the saints. See also "[Will the Church Go Through the Great Tribulation?](#)" For the relationships between "Tribulation Terms," see that chart on p. 38. Pretrib and posttrib mean before or after the tribulation period. Most quotations from John F. Walvoord are from one of his last writings: Prophecy: 14 Essential Keys to Understanding the Final Drama (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1993).*

**Two Advents.** In His first advent our Lord Jesus appeared when and where the godly prophets had predicted for the King. He demonstrated in His works all the wisdom and authority of God's Anointed One (the "Christ"). In Him the promised kingdom had drawn near (Matt. 3:2; 4:17; 10:7). His many mighty miracles (see samples in Matt. 8-9, 10-11) manifested "the powers of the coming age" (Heb. 6:5). He "was sent only to the lost sheep of Israel" (Matt. 15:24) with His kingly credentials. Since prophecies of the kingdom always featured Israel, that nation has to be right before the kingdom will begin. But they "did not repent" (Matt. 11:20) and accept Him (Matt. 11-12). Some day they will say, "he was despised, and we esteemed him not" (Isa. 53:3). Unable to hear or see spiritually (Matt. 13:15), they "crucified the Lord of glory" (1 Cor. 2:8).

After Israel showed they would reject Him, He began promising to come again—come in glory to judge and to rule. He usually promised to gather His saints at that second advent. So, later, did His apostles. Here we will consider some of those promises in the Gospel of Matthew, the Gospel of John, and the Thessalonian Epistles.

**Matthew 13.** After Israel refused to repent, Jesus began teaching in parables which He explained only to His disciples (Matt. 13). These parables revealed "mysteries" (previously unrevealed truths) about His promised kingdom. The main revelation was that it would apparently be delayed. A good example was a parable the Lord interpreted as a model. In it some servants wanted to separate wheat and weeds (tares) in their master's field (which meant "the world"). But he made them wait until the harvest. Only then, he said, will they "first collect the weeds and tie them in bundles to be burned; then *gather the wheat and bring it into my barn*" (Matt. 13:30b). A bit later Jesus explained,

"The harvest is the end of the age, and the harvesters are angels....The Son of Man will send out his angels, and they will weed out of his kingdom everything that causes sin and all who do evil. They will throw them into the fiery furnace....Then the righteous will shine like the sun in the kingdom...." (13:39b-43a)

Such parables showed that the kingdom that drew near at Jesus' first advent would be delayed. Not until "the end of the age" will He inaugurate His kingdom. (See the same time frame for the Parable of the Net, 13:50-51.) Instead, He had to die in shame, rise from the dead, and ascend to wait beside His Father. The disciples began to understand only that there would be a delay. That was evident even in "Holy Week," when Jesus lamented over Jerusalem. He told the city, "you will not see me again until you say, 'Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord'" (Matt. 23:39). Jesus' disciples did not yet ask where He was going but when He was returning.

Matthew 13 Parable. Wheat and tares will be separated only at “the end of the age.” Then tares will be destroyed and wheat will shine in the kingdom.

**Matthew 24.** The disciples’ main concern was “What will be the sign of your *coming* [Greek *parousia*] and of the end of the age?” (Matt. 24:3). Jesus’ answer was His final prophetic discourse (Matt. 24-25; Mark 13; Luke 21). Recording it, Matthew (but only Matthew) used Greek *parousia* for their question and for Jesus’ answer (Matt. 24:3, 27, 37, 39). *Parousia* literally meant “presence” (2 Cor. 10:10; 1 Cor. 16:17). But it “became the official term for a visit of a person of high rank, esp. of kings and emperors visiting a province.”<sup>68</sup> Here it referred to Jesus’ coming to rule. He described conditions leading to that climax. Only after a terrible distress (tribulation) He “will send his angels [to] gather his elect” for His kingdom.

“For as lightning that comes from the east is visible in the west, so will be the coming [*parousia*] of the Son of Man...Immediately after the distress of those days the sun will be darkened...At that time the sign of the Son of Man will appear in the sky, and all the nations of the earth will mourn. They will see the Son of Man coming on the clouds of the sky, with power and great glory. And he will send his angels with a loud trumpet call, and they will gather his elect from the four winds, from one end of the heavens to the other.” (Matt. 24:27-31)<sup>69</sup>

So the Lord’s *parousia* will be posttrib (after the tribulation) and involve gathering the saints to take part in His kingdom. The rest of this discourse (Matt. 24:32 to 25:46) exhorts believers to watch and be faithful while waiting for Him.<sup>70</sup> When He comes, “the faithful and wise servant” will be “put... in charge,” but the wicked servant will be “cut...to pieces.” The “wedding banquet” will take place; but the foolish virgins, who “did not take any oil,” will miss that celebration. Servants who have “put [the Master’s] money to work” will be “put...in charge of many things” and “share [their] master’s happiness.” All who have ministered to the Lord’s “brothers” will “take [their] inheritance, the kingdom,” meaning they will “go...to eternal life.”

Matthew 24. After the tribulation the Lord at His *parousia* (coming) will settle accounts with His servants and begin His rule.

<sup>68</sup> William F. Arndt & F. Wilbur Gingrich, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature* (Chicago: The Univ. of Chicago Press, 1957), 635.

<sup>69</sup> Will the wicked be gathered first, as in Matthew 13, or the righteous, as in Matthew 24? Apparently these are two aspects of a complex process that will separate mankind. One aspect is to separate them through warfare. For example, John sees “the kings of the earth and their armies gathered together to make war” against the Lord at the time of His coming (Rev. 19:19). He captures a few but kills the rest with the sword from His mouth (19:21).

<sup>70</sup> The apostle Paul referred to this same attitude and expectation (“in view of his appearing and his kingdom”) in his final chapter, 2 Timothy 4:1.

**John 14:1-3.** Prophecies like those in Matthew 13 and Matthew 24 required that Jesus would leave His disciples and come again. But the disciples by no means understood. He brought up the same matter again the night He was betrayed. “I will be with you only a little longer.... Where I am going, you cannot come” (John 13:33-37). Simon asked, “where are you going?” and insisted he was willing to follow. Later Jesus said it so deliberately that they thanked Him for finally speaking clearly (16:28-29). Meanwhile, He had again spoken of His return:

“Where I am going, you cannot follow now, but you will follow later....In my Father’s house are many rooms....I am going there to prepare a place for you....I will come back and take you to be with me that you also may be where I am. You know the way to the place I am going.” (John 13:36b; 14:2-3)

It was still not obvious where Jesus was going. Thomas responded, “Lord, we don’t know where you are going, so how can we know the way?” (14:5). Jesus’ answer showed that knowing *where* is much less important than knowing Him: “I am the way...” (14:6). Look again at what He had just promised, which was basically the same as on earlier occasions. He will come and gather the saints to Himself. “I will...take you to be with me” means “I will put you by My side to stay there.” But after gathering them to Himself, what next? Will He remain on earth to rule, as in Matthew 24? John 14 adds a new thought: they must end up in His “Father’s house,” where He will have “prepared a place” for them. Many, therefore, conclude that this is a separate coming in which He takes the saints away to heaven. If so, John 14 is the first promise of the Rapture as they define it. Dispensational theologian John F. Walvoord thinks it means that. But he also adds that *Jesus’ disciples could not have understood it that way!* I will adapt some paragraphs from my course on [“First & Second Thessalonians”](#) to show what Walvoord thinks.

Walvoord discusses when the Rapture was revealed as a separate coming. He does not claim that the Lord in person clearly revealed a separate Rapture. In fact, he finds no Rapture at all in Matthew, Mark, Luke, or John 1-13. Jesus’ “first mention of the Rapture” (p. 109) was in John 14:1-3—on the night before His death. But even that mention was unclear, says Walvoord, because the disciples still did not understand that He would leave them and return. To the extent that they understood His departure, they believed that the Rapture “was a part of the promise to come to earth a second time.” In other words, they saw no distinction between the Rapture and the Second Coming. Walvoord cites no other passage in John or Acts in which such a distinction was made.

When, then, was the separate Rapture explained? “Much later Paul was converted, and God revealed the doctrine of the Rapture to him....Apparently he introduced the doctrine of the Rapture to the Thessalonians....to them, he explained the Rapture at length” (p. 110). Thus Walvoord believes that the first clear written explanations of the Rapture were in the two epistles you are studying. The Lord’s coming is mentioned in every chapter but the last. Pretribulationists believe that most of these no longer refer to the Second Coming, as in the Gospels and Acts, but to the separate and earlier Rapture. In other words, the Lord’s coming (Greek *parousia*) has now become two comings.

So Dispensationalists admit that the Lord kept promising to come again, gather the saints, and reign. But just before His death He seemed to add another feature, as recorded in John 14:1-3. Spokesman Walvoord makes the following assumptions about that passage.

- a. Here Jesus finally revealed another coming, to rapture the saints and take them to heaven.
- b. The disciples, however, *could not have understood* John 14 as a separate coming.
- c. This Rapture was finally made clear by the Apostle Paul in the Epistles to the Thessalonians.

If the disciples could not understand John 14:1-3 the way many do nowadays, how did they probably understand it? Since they knew the eternal kingdom will be on earth, they expected the “Father’s house” to come to them here. And so it will, as seen in Revelation 21. Saying that He is “the way” to that house shows that its physical location is quite secondary.<sup>71</sup>

John 14:1-3. The Lord will come to take us to be and stay with Him and to occupy our places in the Father’s house.

For the next three passages, see also my [“First & Second Thessalonians”](#) course.

**First Thessalonians 4:13-18.** Walvoord says that God “revealed the doctrine of the Rapture” to the apostle Paul, who “explained the Rapture at length” to the Thessalonians. The only passage in 1 Thessalonians that speaks of gathering believers at the Lord’s coming is 4:13-18. From this passage through Latin we get the term *Rapture*, which refers to the catching (snatching) up of saints.<sup>72</sup> Here Paul says that at the Lord’s coming (*parousia*) dead believers will be raised first. Then living believers “will be caught [snatched] up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air” (4:17).

But this is far from proving a separate coming as Walvoord thinks. (a) There is nothing to suggest that this takes place before the tribulation. It could just as likely be the same posttrib *parousia* as in Matthew 24, with the same “trumpet call of God” (1 Thess. 4:16; cf. “loud trumpet call” in Matt. 24:31, “great trumpet” in Isa. 27:12-13). (b) Nothing suggests that those “caught up...to meet the Lord” continue on to heaven. Instead, they will more likely accompany Him to His destination, to rule on earth. That fits the only other New Testament use of the same expression for “to meet,” in Acts 28:15.<sup>73</sup> In other words, *being snatched up implies meeting in the air but not going on to heaven.*

1 Thess. 4:13-18. At the Lord’s *parousia*, dead and living believers will be snatched up to meet Him, then stay with Him.

**First Thessalonians 5:1-11.** This passage immediately follows the one about the *parousia* and Rapture. Some think it indicates that the Rapture is absolutely imminent (has no signs) and is

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<sup>71</sup> The “Father’s house” is not always in heaven. Even during the Gospels it was in Jerusalem on earth (Luke 2:49).

<sup>72</sup> *Rapture* is from the Latin term for “snatch” used in translating Greek *harpagesometha* in 4:17.

<sup>73</sup> In Acts 28:15 believers traveled out from Rome “to meet” Paul then return to Rome, accompanying him to his destination. Similarly, we will meet Christ to accompany Him on to earth, to rule here.

therefore pretrib. However, the Rapture is not even mentioned or clearly referred to in these verses. Neither is the Lord’s coming (though it may be implied). Instead, the appeal is to stay ready for “the day of the Lord,” so that it will not “surprise [us] like a thief” (5:2, 4). We must remain “alert and self-controlled” rather than asleep or drunk (5:6-8).

What is this “day of the Lord” we are supposed to stay ready for, which will come on the world “like a thief in the night”? We have no need to guess; it is the subject of many prophecies. It will include much more than the Rapture. Like literal Jewish days it will begin in the “evening” and continue the next “morning.” It will begin with the darkness of God’s wrath and judgment, then turn to the brilliant light of His coming kingdom. Some prophecies include both aspects. For example, look at Zechariah 14, which begins, “A day of the Lord is coming.” Notice that the Lord’s coming is included in that day, not at its beginning but at its deepest darkness. He will come to rescue Jerusalem when she seems hopeless (Zech. 14:3-5). Then dawns the light, when He “will be king over the whole earth” with His capital in Jerusalem (14:6-21).

First Thessalonians 5:1-11 helps keep us from being surprised when that day finally starts.<sup>74</sup> We have “the hope of salvation as a helmet” (1 Thess. 5:8-9). Our expected salvation is not primarily negative, to avoid that dark tribulation, but positive, to inherit that bright kingdom.

1 Thess. 5:1-11. Does not mention the Lord’s coming but exhorts us to be ready for the Day of the Lord and confident of final salvation.

**Second Thessalonians 2:1-12.** In this passage the technical term *parousia* is used twice for Jesus’ coming, in verses 1 and 8. Though Dispensationalists consider them two different comings, they are the same one, after the tribulation.

- 2:1 combines “the **coming** [*parousia*] of our Lord Jesus Christ and our **being gathered to him.**” Most or nearly all assume that this “coming” and “gathering” includes the Rapture. For that reason Dispensationalists call it pretrib. More likely, it is the same coming as in chapter 1, which will bring trouble to troublemakers and relief to the saints. That is posttrib, as is the Lord’s coming and gathering the elect in Matthew 24.
- 2:8 Jesus destroys “the lawless one...by the splendor of his **coming** [*parousia*].” Everyone recognizes this as posttrib, when He returns to rule. Therefore, Dispensationalists deny that it is the Rapture just mentioned in verse 1.

The order of discussion about the future is the same in both epistles. First, the apostle assured them that the Lord will come to bring comfort and relief for His saints (1 Thess. 4:13-18 and 2 Thess. 1:5-10). Then he exhorted them regarding expecting the Day of the Lord, in which that

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<sup>74</sup> Dispensationalists assume that these warnings show that the Rapture, which they consider pretrib, is absolutely imminent (has no signs). Instead, these warnings refer specifically to the Day of the Lord, which includes the Lord’s posttrib *parousia* (Second Coming) but begins well before it. And the Lord used exactly the same warnings when He discussed that Second Coming (Matt. 24:36-51; cf. Luke 12:35-48), without making it imminent. See the section “The Argument Claiming Absolute Imminence” in my [“Will the Church Go Through the Great Tribulation?”](#)

coming will be a part (1 Thess. 5:1-11 and 2 Thess. 2:1-12). In the first epistle their concern was that believing loved ones who had died would miss out when the Lord returns. By the time of the second epistle (a) they were concerned why God did not put a stop to their being persecuted (2 Thess. 1:5) and (b) some were convinced that “the day of the Lord has already come” (2:2). Dispensationalists turn Paul’s argument into proof for their case.

Paul explained that “that day [of the Lord] will not come until the rebellion occurs and the man of lawlessness is revealed...” (2:3).<sup>75</sup> For that to happen, the restrainer must first retire: “the one who now holds [lawlessness] back will continue to do so till he is taken out of the way” (2:6-8). Dispensationalists argue that this refers to a pretrib Rapture. They allege that the “restrainer” who must be removed before the tribulation can start must be the Holy Spirit in the church, referred to in cryptic language. But that explanation is quite unlikely:

- No one offered that explanation for centuries of church history, as Dispensationalists themselves acknowledge.
- No one would have believed that the Day of the Lord had come if Paul had taught that saints must be raptured to heaven first. It was quite evident that none of them or the apostles had been so raptured. Was he in His epistles teaching them something new? No. “I used to tell you these things,” he said (2:5).
- If 2:1 referred to a pretrib Rapture, it would only be confusing to refer to it in cryptic language in the following verses.
- The translation “till he *is taken out of the way*” is misleading. It represents *heos ek mesou genetai*. The verb *genetai* does not have a passive meaning (“is taken”) but active (“comes to be” or “moves”).<sup>76</sup> *Ek mesou* means “from the midst” or “from among” (Matt. 13:49). Therefore, the clause means “till he gets (moves) out of the midst.” So the prediction is not of a Rapture but of God stepping aside to let lawlessness flourish.

In conclusion, Paul here taught that the Day of the Lord (which includes the *parousia*) cannot even begin until the man of lawlessness is revealed. And that will not happen until God quits restraining evil. Only “then the lawless one will be revealed, whom the Lord Jesus will...destroy with the splendor of His *parousia*” (2:8). So until the Day of the Lord begins while evil runs roughshod, our Lord’s coming and our gathering (Rapture) cannot be imminent. But the Day of the Lord will certainly bring His ultimate triumph.

2 Thess. 2:1-12. The Lord’s *parousia* (coming) and final triumph will be during the Day of the Lord, which cannot begin until God lets lawlessness reach its climax.

<sup>75</sup> Prophets often give us relative orders of events that may be important to know. However, we must not speculate on “the times and dates,” which only the Father knows (1 Thess. 5:1; Acts 1:7).

<sup>76</sup> Some similar uses of this verb are in Acts 25:15 (“When I *went* to Jerusalem”), 27:7 (“difficulty *arriving* off Cnidus”), Luke 2:13 (“*appeared* with the angel”), John 1:6 (“There *came* a man who was sent from God.”).

**Making One Future Coming into Two.** Dispensationalists all admit that the Lord originally promised one future coming (sometimes called the *parousia*). He would come in glory, gather His saints, and rule on earth. They see only that one coming promised in Matthew, Mark, Luke, Acts, and John 1-13. However, they allege that in John 14 and in some of the epistles, God promised another, earlier, coming, to take the saints to heaven. Thus, they think that the one *parousia* has become two. No passage clearly teaches two future comings or even puts them side by side. There are no separate designations to distinguish them. But Dispensationalists think they can sort them out by what will happen in each. If a prediction of the Lord’s coming clearly ends with the saints staying on earth or the Lord beginning to rule, they call it the Second Coming. All other predictions they call the separate Rapture. (One might call this stacking the cards.) See the chart about “The Lord’s Coming” on page 48. An example of their technique is how they label 1 Corinthians 15:23 and 51-52. Both passages refer to the saints being glorified at Jesus’ coming. But they call only 51-52 the Rapture, since in 23 He comes to rule. For the same reason they deny that such as the following describe the Rapture:

- Matthew 24:30-31, “angels...will gather his elect...from one end of the heavens to the other.”
- Revelation 1:7, “Look, he is coming with the clouds, and every eye will see him....”
- Revelation 20:4-6, “They came to life and reigned with Christ....”

This current belief in two *parousias* seems to stem mainly from the desire to keep the church overly separate from Israel. The evidence most often cited to prove this is the mistaken belief that the mystery (revealed secret) in Ephesians is the church. Of course, there is a strong natural desire to escape the Great Tribulation. But the only passages that might favor that view are John 14:1-3 and 1 Thessalonians 4:13-17. But you have seen how those passages can be harmonized with the others. We should recognize that the only *parousia* will be posttrib and that the Rapture at that time will prepare us to inherit the kingdom with our Lord.

CHART B <b>The Lord's One Coming (<i>Parousia</i>) Wrongly Labeled As Two Samples Showing How Some Label the Rapture As a Separate Coming</b>				
Ref & Label	Previous Context	His Coming	Gathering	Destination
Matt. 24:27-31 SECOND COMING	24:4-26. "beginning of birth pains," then "great distress (tribulation)," then "sun ...darkened..."	"after the distress" His <i>parousia</i> like lightning; all will see Him come on clouds in glory	He will send angels with loud trumpet call, to gather the elect from all earth.	Earth, to begin kingdom (as described in Matt. 24:42 to 25:46)
John 14:3 RAPTURE	13:36b to 14:2. He must leave, will prepare place for them in the Father's house.	"I will come again" (no indication when)	literally "I will take you to myself" (not take you away)	to stay with the Lord, also to the Father's house (which will come to earth)
1 Thess. 4:13-18 RAPTURE	God will "bring with" Jesus (= also raise, 2 Cor. 4:14) those who have died in Him.	<i>Parousia</i> (4:15) "the Lord...will come down from heaven" with shout & trumpet call (no indication when)	Dead saints will rise first, then living saints with them, "to meet the Lord in the air."	Doesn't say where (but to earth if they return with Him, by analogy from Acts 28:15)
2 Thess. 2:1 RAPTURE	1:5-10. Believers to get relief when the Lord comes in fire with angels to punish the wicked and to rule in glory.	<i>Parousia</i> in "the day of the Lord," which "will not come until the rebellion...and the man of lawlessness is revealed" (2:2-3)	"our being gathered to him"	Earth (implied from 1:5-10 and 2:8), where He will judge and rule
2 Thess 2:8 SECOND COMING	2:2-7 describes actions of the future man of lawlessness	<i>Parousia</i> , at which the Lord will destroy the lawless one	(implied from 1:5-10 and 2:1)	Earth (implied from 1:5-10), where He will judge and rule
1 Cor. 15:22-23 SECOND COMING	shows that bodily resurrection is essential	<i>Parousia</i> ("when he comes")	"all will be made alive... those who belong to him"	Earth ("for he must reign until," 15:25)
1 Cor. 15:51-52 RAPTURE	15:35-49 tells "what kind of body."	("when he comes," from 15:22-23)	"we will all be changed," living & dead	Earth ("inherit the kingdom... the imperishable," 15:50)
Rev. 19:11 to 20:6 SECOND COMING	Tribulation ending: armies at Armageddon; Babylon falls; "wedding of the Lamb has come."	King of kings comes on white horse with heavenly armies, destroys enemies.	Martyrs rise (in "the first resurrection") to rule with Messiah.	Earth, 1000 year rule

Some call the Lord's soon coming the "Second Coming" in Rev. 1:3, 7 but the "Rapture" in 22:7, 12, 20.