

HOLDING THE MYSTERY OF THE FAITH IN A PURE CONSCIENCE

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Introduction

The matter before us is crucial and key if we are truly going to be introduced to the "trust of the gospel" as the Lord began speaking to us earlier in the year. As we know, the background of our theme text is an outline of what qualifies a person for spiritual services. The statement is specifically made in reference to the office of a deacon.

The concept of a deacon in the church was introduced in Acts 6 when there was a crisis. Certain individuals were chosen to oversee the daily distribution to widows. From at least two prominent individuals among those appointed - Stephen and Philip - we can infer that they were relatively young, and based on the required qualifications, it is obvious that these were individuals with potential and aptitude for a more advanced form of ministry. Of course, we see that Stephen and Philip went beyond serving tables. The office of a deacon afforded them an opportunity to be prepared for a larger and more important role. No doubt, this is what is on the mind of the apostle in writing about deacons. They were individuals being prepared to ascend to the office of a bishop (see v.13).

One distinguishing qualification for the office of a deacon is ***"holding the mystery of the faith in a pure conscience."*** Every other qualification is also attributed to the bishop. It seems to me that this is the basic entry qualification for the trust of the gospel (and by implication, the trust of the church, which is the vessel for the gospel). To fail in this matter is to shipwreck the entire purpose of God over one's life (1 Timothy 1:19-20).

Let us begin by considering the two key phrases in our text:

1. The mystery of the faith.
2. Holding the mystery in a pure conscience.

THE MYSTERY OF THE FAITH

Let us define the two basic words: "mystery" and "faith."

Mystery (Grk: *Musterion*) comes from "*Muo*," which means "to shut the mouth" (in English: mute). Through the idea of silence imposed by initiation, it refers to a secret. It is not "mysterious," but rather something that, being outside the range of assisted natural apprehension, can only be made known by divine revelation. It is made known in a manner and at a time appointed by God, and only to those who are illumined by the Holy Spirit.

Mystery: knowledge withheld.

Uses: Spiritual truth generally as revealed in the gospel (1 Corinthians 13:2, 14:2, 1 Timothy 3:9).

In ancient Greek, "mystery" referred to knowledge possessed by virtue of being initiated into a secret society (see the idea expressed in 1 Corinthians 2:6-16).

This word was used to describe:

1. The gospel (Galatians 2:2, 4:3): Christ, being God, submitted to death and rose again to gather all things unto himself (Ephesians 1:9-10).
2. The Church, which is Christ's body (Ephesians 5:3 to Colossians 1:27, also Revelation 1:20).
3. The Rapture of the Saints (1 Corinthians 15:51).

Faith (Grk: *Pistis*): Persuasion; i.e., credence, moral conviction (of religious truth or the truthfulness of God or a religious leader), especially reliance upon Christ for salvation. Constancy in such perfection, by extension the system of (Gospel) truth itself.

Vine note: Of conviction or beliefs respecting man's relationship to God and divine things - generally with the idea of trust and holy fervour born of faith and joined with it.

Usage:

1. To God, with the conviction that God exists; He is the creator and ruler.
2. To Christ, conviction that he is the Messiah through whom we obtain eternal salvation in the kingdom of God.
3. All religious beliefs of Christians: "the faith."

The minister of God is primarily called to the stewardship of this mystery (1 Corinthians 4:1 and Ephesians 3:9). Therefore, all our services are bound up with this mystery. The mystery is used in various references: *"the mystery of His will"* (Ephesians 1:9), *"the mystery of the gospel"* (Ephesians 6:19), *"the mystery of Christ"* (Ephesians 3:4). All of these are inclusive of the faith. As we noted, "the faith" refers to the sum of Christian belief. When we consider the connection of all these usages, especially the context of Ephesians 1:3-12 (note particularly verse 9 and 10), and Ephesians 2 and 3 (with particular note on 3:6, 11, 12, 17-19) and Colossians 1:27-28, we cannot miss seeing that this mystery is ***"God's eternal purpose in making all things one by way of conformity to His Son, that the fullness of the riches of His glory may reside and be expressed thereby throughout the ages of the ages."***

What is the biggest challenge of creation - humanity in particular? It is nothing but division, disintegration. It is seen in the form of racism, tribalism, nationalism, religion, denomination, social class, etc. Think of all the wars and turmoil the world has been through; one way or another, it is related to this. The primary reason for all this disintegration is that man is out of the Divine orbit. Creation has taken on another course (Ephesians 2:1-3). In Ps. 82:5, we are told "the foundations of the earth are out of course," and the reason is that man left his place as God and fell like one of the princes (verse 6 and 7). God's purpose now is to arise and inherit the nations (v.8).

The disintegration is more graphically illustrated to us in Genesis. In chapter 2:9, we are told "God planted the tree of life in the middle of the garden." That tree we know is Jesus Christ, and He is at the center to hold all things unto God's thought (Colossians 1:16-17). The fall, then, is a disintegration from the center. Think of a mass veering off a rotating orbit. We see the practical and moral effect of this almost immediately. In Genesis 3:20, we can see that there was obvious disharmony in the first family. Adam changed his wife's name from one that indicated he was one with her to simply an external relationship. Isn't that a key indication of the breakdown of a relationship? He no longer sees her as "the bone of my bone" but simply as "mother," even though she had not yet had any children at that time!

We also see how Cain killed Abel, and all the other murders that followed in Chapter 4. Chapter 5 depicts the disharmony between man and creation. It was a story of suffering and death. Chapter 6 showed a total breakdown of human society. That generation ended with only Noah and his family

surviving the flood. Even after the rebuilding of human society through the offspring of Noah, when it seemed that man was united, they were united against God's purpose. This is because their unity did not spring forth from the Divine life revealed in the garden, and their purpose was opposed to God's purpose. They wanted to build a city and tower to make a name for themselves. Do we not see much of that today? What becomes of it? Disintegration! Their language was altered; there was confusion. We see further division in the Earth's surface (Genesis 10:25) and more division as we know it today.

God's purpose, then, is to gather all things in Christ: both things that are in heaven and things on earth (Eph. 1:10). What does this imply? We have talked much about the fall of man, but let us not forget that behind the fall was a sinister force, an intelligent being who rebelled against God and brought that rebellion into creation. Various theories have been advanced regarding this. Some say there was a previous earth in which Lucifer was put in charge, but out of rebellion (together with intelligent beings who joined that rebellion), the first Earth was destroyed. God then created man in His own image to replenish the Earth. Those who hold this view do so in order to reconcile the Genesis account of creation with scientific dating of the existence of the material Earth. I do not quite hold to this view.

I believe the scripture when it says "in the beginning." The account of satanic rebellion is adequately given in the scripture in the prophetic interpretation of Isaiah 14 and Ezekiel 28. In summary, Lucifer was the covering cherub meant to give a continuous opening of the glory of Jehovah to creation. All the stones in the garden were his covering for that purpose. The position he had made it unsuspecting for the woman to engage his wisdom. We are told that pride and the ambition of being raised above the stars of God made him traffic the glory of God. Rather than stand to reflect God's glory as a way of directing worship to God, he sought to arrogate the worship of God himself, and he did this by libeling God. Of course, he got what he wanted. Both he and all the angels that followed him in this rebellion lost their first estate. I believe the curse of the serpent represents the fall of Lucifer. Ultimately, the rebellion and man joining in it represented a cosmic feud! It resulted in a disintegration that goes beyond this earthly realm and which, of course, affects the earth tremendously.

Since this disintegration is cosmic, in order to undo it, the solution must be cosmic. That is, we must have a cosmic Christ; a Christ (Messiah) that is beyond the human race, that is timeless, and that is heavenly. And this

is what Jesus represented; he is made higher than the heavens (Hebrew 7:27, 9:24, Eph. 1:20, 3:10, 4:10). In His work of reconciling all things unto the Father, He has to deal with all these cosmic sinister forces - all these hosts of darkness and the prince of the power of the air. The scriptural representation of these forces, this disintegration, is called death. This is what Jesus Christ came to undo. We are told that the last enemy is death (1 Corinthians 15:26). He did this by bringing life and immortality to light through the gospel (1 Timothy 1:10). But life is always expressed in a body. There can be no life without a body. Think about coming here and seeing a head talking and standing all by itself, a hand moving on its own, or two legs walking without a body. I'm sure you would run for your dear life. Life is always in a body. That body that carries and expresses the life that Christ has brought, that represents the gathering together of all things in Christ, is the church. It is into this that all things are gathered according to His thought. This is the mystery; this is His eternal purpose: all things in Christ for an expression of the riches of His glory unto all ages.

This purpose has existed even before creation. The fall was only an attempt to disrupt this purpose. To undo this attempt, the work of redemption was brought in and carried on through the preaching of the gospel. What is meant by the preaching of the gospel? It is simply the proclamation of what Jesus has done in order to restore humanity and creation back to God's eternal purpose. What is the message of the gospel? It is that through the death of the Son of God, the power of death has been vanquished, and through His resurrection, life and immortality have been brought to light, made accessible to humanity (Colossians 2:11-15, Ephesians 2:14-18, 2 Timothy 1:9-10). This is truly good news! What is the reason for all this? It is so that all things will be eternally reconciled to God. How is this to be accomplished? It is through the proclamation of the message and the testimony expressed in the church, which is His body.

In summary, we see that the unveiling of this mystery, of this purpose, is through the gospel. The realization of that purpose is in the formation of the church or the body in which God dwells. This, of course, tells us that the church cannot be formed simply by gathering people, but that it is essentially spiritual and that individuals are brought into it spiritually. It is only on this basis that any corporate and local expression of the church can have any meaningful impact. We see, then, the vital place of the church in this mystery. If you truly appreciate this, you will recognize why the apostle insists that the basic entry qualification into the gospel ministry and service of the church and God's eternal purpose is to "hold the mystery" with a pure conscience.

Our particular concern now is how this mystery, as revealed to us, can be carried on in order to reach God's purpose. How can we, in a practical sense, hold this mystery? How can God's purpose of finding full satisfaction in the church be realized? Isn't that the entire purpose of Paul's first letter to Timothy, particularly this instruction in 1 Timothy 3:14-15? The implication of the instruction is that all of God's purpose, all of the mystery of His will as bound up in the proclamation of the gospel and the building of the one body, depends on these men who will bear responsibility for the church through their leadership. The fundamental issue that can either jeopardize or preserve all that has been brought forth through eternity past is this matter of a pure conscience.

HOLDING IN A CONSCIENCE

To recap all that has been said:

1. The mystery is related to God's eternal purpose even before the disruption.
2. The mystery is God's means of dealing with the cosmic disruption.
3. The revelation of this mystery is the primary reason for the proclamation of the gospel.
4. The church is the only visible and practical testimony to this mystery.
5. The servants of God are primarily called into the stewardship of this mystery.

We start our second meditation by defining the other words in our theme text:

- 1. Holding (Grk: *echo/scheo*):** possession, ability, contiguity, relation, condition. Having the means to accomplish a task. Holding something in an internal way.
- 2. Pure (Grk: *katharos*):** Clean, free from impure admixture, without blemish, spotless. Freedom from defilement of the flesh and the world.

In relation to conscience, we can think of purity as the precision of a measuring instrument. The precision or sensitivity of a measuring instrument is determined by the errors caused by defects.

It is considered pure if there are absolutely no defects in it. All errors caused by magnet or electrical flux are removed, or if it is a chemical measure, its pH value is not affected by an admixture.

Conscience (Grk: *Suneidesis*): Co-perception; that is moral consciousness. "A knowing," a co-knowledge with oneself. The witness borne to one's conduct by conscience. That faculty by which we apprehend the will of God as that which is designed to govern our life. The word emphasizes that we receive input from our surroundings (e.g., temptation, decision-making events), and we are driven to make a decision. We compare what we know with our conscience (con: "with", science: "knowledge")—our knowledge base about this input. If we follow our conscience, we act accordingly to what we know to be true about the situation and the consequences/blessings of our decision. We can violate our conscience by overriding that knowledge.

Think of conscience as a measuring instrument. It is first calibrated by a standard measure (input knowledge). When a quantity is brought to be measured, it is compared against the standard to which it was calibrated. Conscience is a moral measuring device in a person.

We noted in our previous meditation that the cause of the initial disintegration was the pride in the heart of Lucifer, and that was transferred to the woman by way of ambition. The implication of all this is that the cause of disintegration is a moral one. Therefore, it means that the undoing of disintegration must also be moral. We have also stated that God's way of dealing with the disintegration is through the redemptive work of Jesus Christ. The work of redemption is not merely legal and transactional; it is, in fact, first and foremost a moral issue, which is why it could be legal. Consider Romans 5:18-19, "One man's righteousness," "one man's obedience"; moral issues are involved here.

T. Austin-Sparks puts it very well: *"the point is that this Son of God, the Son of Man, did not undertake this work in an independent and detached way, but himself became the representative and embodiment of all these. Because moral factors are involved requiring judgement and death, a position has to be accepted. This could be nothing merely official, it had to be moral and spiritual. So in order to effect a full recovery to a position in keeping with God's holiness for holy purpose, the Son of God was made sin (in the hour of his atoning work), entered into the alienation because of that accepted position ('My God, My God, why have You forsaken me?'), became marred (marred more than any man), fought out the battle of God's right, and destroyed the inimical powers and works, redeemed the heritage 'unto God,' secured the elect in 'the blood of the everlasting covenant,' and ratified the eternal purpose."* [Read: Isaiah 53:10-12, 63:16, Colossians 2:15, Hebrew 2:14-15].

So we see that the work was on moral grounds, and the response to that work must be on moral grounds as well. Otherwise, all we have been saying will just be left in the philosophical realm with no real meaning. Therefore, faith in the work of redemption must necessarily have a moral implication. One cannot claim to have faith without corresponding moral adjustments. Such faith will be mere mental assent to the truth.

[Regarding the argument that man is totally depraved and therefore conscience cannot guide him aright, let it be noted that we are referring to the regenerated spirit of which conscience is a faculty. We have established that the first work of grace in redemption is to awaken the heart to moral judgement. When this is done, a person is under moral

obligation to accept the truth or to choose eternal damnation by rejecting the truth. In this regard, Scripture says there remains no more sacrifice for sins; i.e., no other way of salvation than the one rejected. Such a person has chosen to violate their conscience and harden their heart.]

We see the moral effect of this mystery in Paul when he came to understand it (2 Corinthians 5:1-21). Pay particular attention to verse 14. One cannot become aware of such a truth and not act accordingly, unless their conscience is deeply flawed. For example, if the Lord had revealed to Paul what he came to understand in verses 14-17 of 2 Corinthians 5, what would have been the implication if Paul did not consider himself truly dead? If he had held onto all his rights, pride, and identity as a Jew, segregating himself from Gentiles as was typical of Jews during his time, would he have been able to carry out such a rich ministry? If he did not reckon himself dead indeed, holding onto such grounds would have contradicted and undermined the message he preached. How could he say, "Christ died for **all**..." and "...**all** died," when he himself was not dead, when he was still living for himself, his personal ambitions, etc.? Morally speaking, that would have been denied by the way he lived. If he preached the death of Christ and lived otherwise, it would have made a mockery of the gospel. This is just one example that can be applied in many other moral and practical ways.

It is precisely this issue of the spiritual and moral implication of the mystery that we are concerned with when we talk about "holding the mystery in a pure conscience." How can we hold the mystery in a pure conscience?

1. Live in the Reality of the New Birth

We entered into this mystery through a spiritual birth. When we came to Jesus, we left behind our natural grounds, our own wisdom (see Matthew 11:25-30). I trust this is true for everyone here. But if you have not yet experienced this new birth, you can come to Jesus! By expressing a heartfelt faith in Jesus Christ, we have the witness of His death and resurrection in our spirit. This becomes a vital reality within us, the foundation of all our living from that point forward. Like Paul, our confession will be: "We all died, that those who live might not live unto themselves..."; "I am crucified with Christ..."; "It is no longer I who live." This is no trivial matter; we must live in this new reality. It makes a tremendous difference when we realize what we have become in Christ; it affects our conscience and our actions.

There is a story told of a slave who was attending a function with the king. The function involved kings and their princes. Since the king had no child, the slave was to act as the prince. The king gave him a bag of royal clothes and other things. On the way to the occasion, it rained and both the slave and the king got wet. The king went inside and changed into dry clothes, but the slave went to the fireplace, undressed, and hung the wet clothes over the fire, remaining naked while waiting for the clothes to dry. Someone saw him and asked, "Who brought this slave here?" The slave was surprised that they could tell he was a slave and not a prince. His actions gave him away. Slaves typically have only one set of clothes, and when they get wet, they hang them over the fire and stay naked until they dry. This slave didn't realize he had been promoted to the status of a prince and had been given enough clothes that he didn't need to go naked! He was still thinking like a slave. This story is true for many Christians; they fail to realize who they are in Christ and the riches they possess in Him. Their minds have not been renewed; they still think like slaves under the power of darkness and the elementary principles of this world (see Ephesians 4:17-24, Colossians 2:6-10).

May we never reach a point where we trivialize the matter of being born again, where it fails to bring awe to our hearts. May we never lose the wonder of the cross. It is a tremendous thing to be translated from the kingdom of darkness to the kingdom of His dear Son, to be taken from outer darkness back into the orbit of God's eternal purpose, to be delivered from the power of the prince of the air. The devil wants to diminish the value of your salvation; he does everything to cheapen the concept of being born again, to give false hope to people. He knows that truly entering into this and living in the reality of this new life means denying him any legal and moral hold over you. It means removing all grounds for his accusations because, in a sense, you stand justified.

2. Gaining a Deep and Progressive Knowledge and Spiritual Understanding

There is a great need to gain deep spiritual understanding regarding God's purpose, the work of redemption, and our position in redemption and God's eternal purposes. The apostle placed great importance on ensuring that the established churches were taught the whole counsel of God, both through teachings and examples. This was his burden for the churches (see Acts 20:19-21,27; Ephesians 1:15-22; Colossians 1:9,28, 2:3-13). Unfortunately, there is a significant lack of progress in spiritual

understanding today, and it is disheartening to witness the level of spiritual ignorance among many people. Some may attend church for 50 years without making any serious progress in basic spiritual knowledge, making it difficult to communicate anything deep to them (Hebrews 5:11-14).

Here are suggestions on how we can pursue deep and progressive spiritual knowledge and understanding:

i. Spiritual Hunger: It is necessary to have a strong desire for spiritual knowledge. We must recognize our need for it and be desperate to obtain it. Let us nurture this hunger and refuse to be satisfied with shallow spiritual teachings. Let us look to those who have made progress in their spiritual understanding and allow their example to ignite our hunger. Remember, it is the hungry who will be filled. May we never reach a point of self-satisfaction where, like the Laodicean church, we say we have need of nothing (Revelation 3:17-18).

ii. Discipline to Study: Unfortunately, discipline is lacking in this age. Many young people have not been trained to concentrate; they are easily distracted, and this is reflected in the kind of Christians being produced. Read about the Puritan fathers and the Methodist pioneers and see how they would stay up all night reading. They could take a verse or two and write volumes about it. Acquiring knowledge with the guidance of the Holy Spirit is essential for gaining spiritual understanding. The Holy Spirit does not impart knowledge in a vacuum; you have to study to acquire the necessary information. Take Paul as an example. He was learned in the law and had all the information, but before his conversion, it was distorted, confused, and misunderstood, which hindered his conscience from guiding him rightly. At that time, he believed it was acceptable to kill for God, and his conscience did not condemn him due to his flawed understanding. Then he had an illumination. The information did not change, but through the working of the Holy Spirit, it became a profound revelation to him. It is crucial to understand this and not misinterpret statements like "I was not taught it, nor did I receive it from men." This refers to the spiritual understanding Paul received, not to information that is unavailable to others. Paul studied books that were available to other people of his time. Without such study, the Holy Spirit could not have granted him such revelation. This misunderstanding has led to much error when people claim to have a revelation that is based on information that is improvised and inaccessible to the spiritual judgement of other enlightened minds. Paul had a spiritual understanding that could be examined by other enlightened minds. This is the scriptural standard

(see 1 Corinthians 14:29). If we want to attain spiritual knowledge, we must study.

iii. Humility to be Instructed: Similar to studying, this involves receiving information, but this time from teachers who are anointed. This leads to spiritual understanding. Paul says, "We speak wisdom... these things we also speak, not in words which man's wisdom teaches..." (1 Corinthians 2:6,13). Just as studying the Bible requires the right atmosphere or teachers whose ministry is attested to by the Holy Spirit, under such an atmosphere, there is an opening and enlightenment of the spiritual mind. Also, it is essential to approach the Word of God with humility and meekness; we can only receive it in that way (James 1:19-21). The meek are the ones whom He will guide in judgement. May we never underestimate the necessity of gaining spiritual knowledge. If our conscience is to guide us rightly, it must be instructed correctly, especially in today's increasingly complex and complicated world.

iv. Prayer: Prayer opens our spirit to the influence of the Holy Spirit. Paul emphasized the importance of prayer in leading the churches to spiritual understanding. Therefore, we must devote ourselves to prayer if we want to gain spiritual understanding.

3. Spiritual Knowledge Gained Must be Applied

Having knowledge without applying it only defiles the conscience. We must train our hearts to apply spiritual truth. This is done by promptly responding to revealed truth and to the prompting of the Holy Spirit. We must repent and adjust our lives to align with the revelations we have received. At the end of every lesson, teaching, and instruction, let us ask, like the Jews, "Men and brethren, what shall we do?" It is the doers of the word who are blessed. Not acting upon the truth means deceiving ourselves and violating our consciences (James 1:22). Practicing the truth sharpens our spiritual discernment (Hebrews 5:14).

Now, ask yourself how you have been living out the great doctrines of the Christian faith. For instance, how does your belief in the fatherhood of God reflect in your life during times of despair? You believe in the death and resurrection of Jesus, so what practical value does that have for you? You believe in the Holy Spirit, but do you consciously submit yourself to His leading and influence? You believe in the second coming of Christ and in judgement, so how does that reflect in your daily life, the value

you place on earthly pursuits, and your concern for the souls of others and the urgency of the mission?

4. Guard Against the Hardening of the Heart

Hardening of the heart affects the conscience more than anything else. It occurs through:

i. Pride: When the heart becomes prideful, a person may know the truth, but instead of acting accordingly, they would rather violate their conscience than lose their ego. If we want to maintain a pure conscience, pride must be decisively dealt with. We can see an example of this in Pharaoh; his pride led to the hardening of his heart.

ii. Unbelief: When the heart begins to question the word of God, the goodness of God, and everything that has been revealed about God, unbelief sets in, and the heart starts to harden. This was the case with Israel, and God said they were stiff-necked. The Hebrew Christians were also in danger of falling into unbelief, as evidenced by the many warnings in the book of Hebrews (see Hebrews 3).

iii. Persistence in a sinful habit or deliberate disobedience to a clear leading of the Holy Spirit.

5. Pursuing Authentic Christian Fellowship

God has placed other believers in our lives to serve as a check to our conscience, especially during times of temptation. Furthermore, the mystery is closely related to our unity in fellowship. One way to hold the mystery in a pure conscience is through authentic Christian fellowship. How can this be achieved?

i. Endeavour to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. We must actively pursue peace to the best of our abilities.

ii. Guard against slander. This is crucial and is even required for the wife of a deacon. A slanderous wife can poison the conscience of the deacon. Slander is precisely what the devil did to Eve against God (the word itself is derived from the same root word as "Satan"). Slander undermines what the mystery stands for.

iii. Confess your faults to one another. This keeps your conscience sensitive by being accountable to fellow believers.

iv. Encourage one another to love and good works. Let us uplift and show kindness to one another.

How will you respond to all these instructions? Begin with prayer and continue by making practical applications as the Holy Spirit leads. May the Lord find us worthy to hold the mystery of the faith in a pure conscience.

ABOUT GOSPEL ALLIANCE

Welcome to Gospel Alliance, the Christian body that aims to raise mature and balanced Christian workers who will lead reformation and revival in the Church. Our vision is for the Church to fulfil her vocation in this age, and we believe that this can be achieved through prayer, fellowship, training, and a strong emphasis on family life. Our mission is to provide a platform for Christian workers to come together in fellowship and receive ministerial support. We believe that through this, we can labor for the reformation and revival of the Church, as we seek to align ourselves with the Word of God. As part of our mission, we are committed to mobilizing the Church to take responsibility for evangelism and missions in all its various forms. We believe that the Church has a vital role to play in bringing the good news of Jesus Christ to a lost and hurting world. Join us on this journey as we seek to make a difference in the world, one life at a time. Send us a mail at gospelalliance2016@gmail.com or call **08163331057, 08160530658 or 08137048222.**