

"The Administration of the Mystery."

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"By revelation the mystery has been made known to me that they who are of the nations should be joint heirs, and a joint body, and joint partakers of His promise in Christ Jesus by the glad tidings; of which I am become minister to announce among the nations the glad tidings of the unsearchable riches of the Christ, and to enlighten all with the knowledge of what is the administration of the mystery hidden throughout the ages in God" (Eph. 3: 3-9. Darby's New Translation).

In the above passage the Apostle Paul clearly states that he was called to be minister of "the mystery" in a twofold way.

Firstly, it was given to him to announce among the nations, or Gentiles, "the unsearchable riches of the Christ." This he did by word of mouth in the days of his free and unfettered service, and when a prisoner, the gist of this ministry was committed to writing "in few words," or "briefly," but under the direct inspiration of the Spirit of God; and thus it comes to pass that we have it today. If Ephesians 1: 1 - 4: 16, be studied, it will be noticed how rich is the unfolding of all that is wrought, and found, and established in Christ according to the eternal purpose of God; and into all these riches, utterly beyond our ability to track out, we who are from among the Gentiles have been brought. The early part of Ephesians, then, is the great unfolding of "the unsearchable riches of the Christ;" supplemented by the Epistle to the Colossians, which more particularly emphasizes the unsearchable greatness of Christ Himself, who is the Head of the body, the church.

Secondly, it was given to him to enlighten all as to "the administration of the mystery." The word here translated "administration" means, "the law, or arrangement, of a house," and is the one from which we have got our word "economy." The Gospel having gone out by God's command among the nations, and having resulted in the introduction of "they who are of the nations" into the body of Christ and the house of God, an entirely new situation had been created. A new "economy," or "house-law," or "administration," had to be established, entirely fresh arrangements had to prevail in the church, which was God's house now that the temple in Jerusalem had been set aside, and it was Paul's business to make plain to all what this new administration was.

Now though the Apostle mentions this fact in the Epistle to the Ephesians, he does not appear to enlarge upon it in that epistle: we must turn rather to the two Epistles to the Corinthians, supplemented by the two Epistles to Timothy, though these were addressed to an individual and not a church. We also get glimpses of Paul establishing the new administration in the Acts of the Apostles, and glimpses too in other of his epistles.

We do not now propose to deal with "the unsearchable riches of the Christ," as unfolded in Ephesians, since we believe that amongst those Christians, who are likely to read this paper, there would be little if any difference of thought as to these happy themes. There we should be dealing with the great eternal thoughts of God for Christ and the church, and that work which is wholly His in bringing into existence and maintaining the church as a present existing thing — His house, and the body of Christ. It is when we come to the "administration" which is to prevail in the church during its sojourn in the world, that the difficulties begin. Ephesians 3: 2 states that this administration (in A.V. "dispensation," but it is the same word) was committed to Paul in the first place: then he was to enlighten all concerning it, so that it should be observed and carried out in all church affairs. Clearly then, here is something in which men have to take a part. We are to carry things out according to the will of the Lord, and if we do so, and as far as we do so, the church becomes to angelic beings a display

of the manifold wisdom of God. But, alas! as soon as we come to things in which we have a hand, as lying within the sphere of our responsibility, failure supervenes and difficulties multiply.

There are those of course who brush aside Paul's administration. Though believers in Christ, they think that Paul's instructions in church matters are not of binding importance in the twentieth century, whatever they may have been in the first. We are confident that our readers are not among these. Nor are they, we trust, amongst those who, whilst accepting Paul's inspired instructions, hold themselves free to add a little from other sources, as they think may be needed; as though Scripture were not enough. Scripture is enough, as is made very manifest in 2 Timothy 3: 16, 17. If Scripture suffices to furnish the man of God fully and completely to every good work, there is no work that is good — whether in the church, or outside it in the world — that is not covered by Scripture. We need nothing beside.

The epistles to the Corinthians — and those to Timothy also — witness very strikingly to the fact that God not only knows how to make the wrath of man to praise Him, but also how to make the sin and folly and disorder of His saints to work out for spiritual instruction to multitudes. At the time Paul wrote his first letter there was at Corinth a very serious state of disorder. Many of them were but recently converted out of heathenism; they were but babes, and sad to say their state was "carnal;" hence evil of a very shocking order was in their midst, and their very assemblings together were occasions not for the better but for the worse; their proceedings being full of disorder. This led Paul to lay before them the essential features of the administration that was to rule in their midst.

Bad as was the case of incest amongst them, it was not this which had the first place in the mind of the Spirit of God, but the state of division that characterized them. The former was like a horrible growth which could be removed by a suitable operation, but the latter was a deep-seated disease which, unless checked, would vitiate and deny the whole character of the church of God.

The "divisions," which are mentioned in 1 Cor. 1: 10, were schisms or parties which had been formed inside the church at Corinth. They are referred to again in chapter 11: 18, where we find that they were of so definite a character as to be visible when they came together in assembly; though, as verse 20 shows, they were still coming together in one place. These schisms led to "contentions" (1 Cor. 1: 11), and what lay behind all were "heresies" (1 Cor. 11: 19), which were among them. These heresies were strong opinions, upon which may be founded a faction or a sect. The heretic of Titus 3: 1, was an opinionative person who creates or fosters a faction. Paul was prepared to give at least partial credence to the reports of the divisions at Corinth since he knew that, owing to their carnal state, there were bound to be these opinionative factions in their midst.

In 1 Cor. 11: 19 then, great stress must be laid on the words, "among you," which refer us back to 1 Cor. 3: 3. In that verse he had said, "Whereas there is among you envying and strife, and divisions, are ye not carnal, and walk as men?" — thus reasoning back from their carnal actions to their carnal state. In 1 Cor. 11: 19 he reasons forward from their state to their actions. Knowing them to be carnal and walking as men, he knew that they would certainly fall victims to the inveterate tendency of the human mind to form its strong opinions, and the factions founded on those opinions, ending in the schisms and divisions. He knew too that God would overrule their folly, and take occasion to make manifest those that were approved of Him, walking according to the Spirit and not as men; and consequently eschewing the whole of this divisive business.

At Corinth these factions and parties were crystallised around men, and thus it has ever been. In the light of 1 Cor. 4: 6, we may assume that the real transgressors were local leaders and that delicacy of Christian feeling led the Apostle to use his own name together with those of Apollos and Cephas,

instead of the names of the actual men. The names he does use are quite significant, for in regard to the Corinthians Paul had been the evangelist, Apollos the teacher, and Cephas was called to a pastoral ministry, as John 21 shows. It is almost inevitable that some will prefer the earnest evangelist, some the eloquent, clear-headed teacher, and others the kindly pastor. The trouble comes when the men who possess these gifts become so magnified in people's eyes that they are made into leaders of parties. Hence the powerful ministry of the truth as to the cross of Christ, which fills the latter part of 1 Cor. 1, and the equally powerful ministry of truth concerning the Spirit which fills 1 Cor. 2. The cross of Christ demonstrates the folly and nothingness of man, and puts him out. The Holy Spirit brings in Christ, who is the power and wisdom of God.

But what about those who were saying, "and I of Christ"? Were they the approved ones of 1 Cor. 11: 19 — those who were refusing men's ways, and walking in the Spirit? Clearly they were not, for the Apostle censures them with the others. Further, he immediately asks, "Is Christ divided?" — which infers that this is just what they were doing. They were dividing Christ, for their "I" was only the "I" of a faction. Now it is quite true that all the saints are "of Christ," or "Christ's." The last verse of 1 Cor. 3 says so, for the same expression is used there; only it is "ye," and that meant the whole church at Corinth, and not a faction merely. This saying, "I of Christ" was really worse than saying, I of Paul, or Apollos, or Cephas.

Many years ago a well-known servant of God made a pronouncement to the effect that he would belong to no party, not even to one formed to defend the truth. He had ample warrant for it in this which is before us. The truth of the church cannot be maintained by forming a party to defend it, since the forming of the party is itself a denial of the truth of the church. It is very easy to forget this.

When we come to 1 Cor. 5, we have the aggravated case of immorality that had so far been permitted at Corinth. The Divine administration demands that such an one be put away from amongst the saints, as also such evil-doers as are mentioned in 1 Cor. 5: 11. In 1 Cor. 6 there is a stern rebuking of the saints carrying their disagreements and judgments before the world, and in this connection a further list of proscribed evils is given in 1 Cor. 6: 9 and 10. All such people are to be outside the church of God. The administration thus laid down is very plain, and has simply to be obeyed by us.

In 1 Cor. 8, 9 and 10, Paul enlightens us as to the administration concerning certain practical matters which aroused contention in the early church. The mystery, as we saw in Ephesians 3, has to do with Gentiles being joint heirs, a joint body and joint partakers through the Gospel; and the bringing in of Gentiles created immense difficulties. The Jewish mind was essentially legal and narrow as the result of centuries spent under the law as their schoolmaster, shut up from any spiritual contact with the nations. The Gentile mind was broad and easy-going, unhampered by the small enactments which bound the Jew. Peace could only be expected in the early church as the mind of God superseded the minds of both Jew and Gentile. There is ample evidence here, and in the Epistle to the Romans and elsewhere, that even in the brightest, apostolic days there was plenty of imperfection in the church, and many difficulties arising out of this very matter.

How are these matters administered? Not by the laying down of a few plain rules, which do not call for the exercise of conscience and grace and spiritual judgment. We read in 1 Cor. 8, and it seems as if Paul rather brushes aside idols, and the whole question of meats offered to idols, as being a matter of little moment, save as regard the consciences of any who may be weak. We turn to 1 Cor. 10, and it seems that after all idols are very important since demonic powers lie behind them, and in eating their meats we may partake of the table of demons, and provoke the Lord to jealousy. Then we go back to 1 Cor. 9, and we find Paul himself varying his procedure; becoming a Jew to gain the Jews, as without

law to gain those without law. Paul was a Jew, yet so truly was he now Christian that he had to become as a Jew. And when he became as without law, he was all the time thoroughly subject to Christ.

What then does all this mean? It evidently means that it pleases God that in the church there shall be a number of things as to which no rules are given, but the saints are left to be tested and exercised by them. As they are exercised they grow, and become "of full age . . . their senses exercised to discern both good and evil" (Heb. 5: 14). Should I eat, or should I not eat? Or again, that feast spoken of in 1 Cor. 10: 27; should I go, or should I not go? How easy to have issued the command, "Under no circumstances go to any feast where there is the smallest chance of the host furnishing you with meat which has been offered to idols." But the command was not issued. Of course I may not be disposed to go, but if I am disposed, I am left at liberty to go, with the instruction to consider the conscientious feelings of others, if they express them.

So as to Paul's service. He acts as under law to God, being "legitimately subject to Christ" — such is the force of that important little parenthesis in verse 21 — and there we must leave him. All the saints of his day may not have agreed with all the restrictions he thought fit to observe, when going after the Jews; and it is quite certain that all did not agree with the liberties he permitted himself, when going after the souls of the Gentiles. The administration of the mystery does not demand that we force him, or that he force us, into an exact and prescribed mould: it rather demands that we do nothing of the kind.

In 1 Cor. 11 the administration of the Lord's supper is laid down, and as to this we need not now speak particularly. In 1 Cor. 12 - 14, we have the Lord's administration as to the order to be observed when the church comes together in assembly, and the character which should be stamped upon such gatherings. When the church is thus convoked the Lord is supreme, and the Spirit of God is the power for all that is rightly done, and consequently love is the all-pervading spirit, when things are as they should be. It will be noticed that in 1 Cor. 14 all ordinary assembly activities are mentioned, prophesying, praying blessing God, giving of thanks, the giving out and singing of psalms or hymns. All is to be in the grace and energy of the Spirit of God. Even a hymn will not be right, save as given out and sung in the grace which He supplies.

This chapter does not end without a statement to the effect that, "the things that I write unto you are the commandments of the Lord" (verse 37). This covers doubtless all the administration laid down in the epistle, and not only this chapter. But it does quite definitely cover this chapter. Even in the order of church assemblies the Lord administers and we are not left to our own devices. Men have adopted their own devices and ignored the Divine administration. Almost worse, it looks today as if many, who formerly observed it, are abandoning it in favour of fresh devices. Let us see that we do not act thus.

We do not pursue the theme further, save to point out one further item which is emphasised in 2 Corinthians 6: 11 - 7: 1. By the time he wrote his second letter Paul's anxieties as to the Corinthians were largely relieved, and consequently his heart was enlarged toward them and his mouth opened to speak to them yet more plainly. In this powerful passage as to separation from the world he went down to the root of things, for worldly alliances lay at the foundation of most of the evils he had to deal with in his earlier letter, if not all of them.

"Be not diversely yoked with unbelievers" (New Translation). The reference is to Deuteronomy 22: 10. The ox and the ass are not merely creatures of different habits, but of different natures. To have them in the same field may be all right, but to yoke them together is to subject them to an unnatural strain. The believer and the unbeliever are of totally different nature and character, as verses 14-16 make so plain. They exist side by side in the same world, but there is to be no yoking together, for the

church is entirely distinct from the world. They are distinct and apart in the mind of God, and are to be so in life and practical ways.

Without a doubt this was the point of failure and weakness at Corinth: equally without a doubt it is the point of failure and weakness to-day. We may often spend our strength combating details of wrong surface behaviour, while leaving this deep-seated matter untouched; and hence very little good of a permanent sort is accomplished.

Much might be said as to administrative details laid down in the Epistles to Timothy, but we confine ourselves to the important point which comes before us in 2 Timothy 2: 16-26. Here very strict separation is enjoined as to those whose teachings are of so false a character as to overthrow the faith of those who imbibe them, and which will spread like a gangrene. Paul writes to an individual believer and he is to "shun," "depart," "purge himself from," and "turn away" from such. We think it goes without saying that if such is to be the attitude of the individual saint towards the teacher of fundamentally false doctrine, the false teacher of this stamp is not to be tolerated in the bosom of the church of God.

Disciplinary action may be taken in the church of God which falls short of the above, action which does not involve the offender being put into the outside place. Such discipline we have enjoined in 1 Thessalonians 5, and 2 Thessalonians 3.

We call attention to these things because those saints, who to-day aim at walking in communion according to the truth of the church, and in the observance of the principles established by the Lord's administration, are again and again confronted by difficult situations. There is not so much difficulty usually when matters of downright immorality or fundamentally false doctrine are involved. There is much more difficulty over matters of discipline, of reception, and of service.

We cannot expect to be without difficulties. The New Testament bears ample witness to the fact that difficulties abounded in the Apostolic age, so we need not be surprised at having plenty to-day. As we have already noticed, at the beginning a great many sprang from clashes between Jew and Gentile in the church of God. For ourselves today such clashes would be very infrequent, we suppose; yet very frequently there are clashes between what we may call, the Jewish mind and the Gentile mind. Some of us are so constituted naturally that matters of church order greatly appeal to us. We love correctness, exactitude and discipline. Numbers do not greatly appeal to us: we might rather favour a smaller number, as likely to be people of a better quality and more select and spiritual.

Others of us, however, look upon this kind of thing as petty and narrow-minded. We favour more that which is large-hearted and evangelical, and are inclined to think that there can be too much insistence on points of exact order, until things pass from what is Scriptural to what is merely traditional. We should agree of course that we must refuse both those guilty of immoral behaviour and those holding fundamentally false doctrine, and their wilful associates; but apart from that we should be more easy-going in our judgments.

There being this state of things, what can be done about it? We know what has been done in the past, and the way in which those past actions have aggravated our difficulties. We know too that some are inclined to do over again what has been done in the past. Suffer then this word of admonition.

The tendency of the Jewish mind is towards division. This comes out plainly in Galatians 2: 12. It was Peter who, under the influence of certain who came from James, "withdrew and separated himself," from the Gentiles, and not vice versa. Its tendency also is toward "judging another man's servant," Romans 14 shows this, as it also shows that the tendency of the Gentile mind is to "despise

him that eateth not," because of his Jewish scruples, and to hold him at arm's length; or if receiving him, to receive him only "to doubtful disputations," that is, to argue with him, as though he must be made to drop his notions and think just as one does oneself. If these tendencies, on either side, are given free play, we come under condemnation, as not acting according to the administration which we have received through Paul.

Some to-day seem to say, "We are confident that the things we advocate are right, and we believe we should withdraw and separate ourselves from all that disregards them." That is of course exactly what has been done in the past, and it is tantamount to saying, "We feel we must have a separate group of those who are quite agreed on these points." In the past some who have committed themselves to that kind of thing have gone as far as to say that they alone really had the presence of Christ in their midst when assembled together; that is, they have formally taken the ground of "I am of Christ," the ground so scathingly denounced by the Apostle in 1 Corinthians 1. Others would not go quite as far as saying that, but they still advocate the idea of having a group which is purged of any holding ideas or following practices which they believe to be wrong. Only recently we heard of one, who withdrew from a certain meeting to throw in his lot with another body of Christians, giving as his reason for so doing, that he knew he had rather the legal type of mind, so he thought he would be happier with those who ran on those lines. He wished to be in a group of like-minded people. It was a case of "Birds of a feather flock together." The only question we ask is, Does the administration of the mystery through Paul demand, or even countenance, action such as this?

It certainly does not. Rather it decidedly negatives it. It is indeed troublesome when there are persons of different minds and opinions about, but the divine way of meeting the difficulty is not to form a party to oppose them, and so almost force them into being an opposite party. Such action is only repeating the error which prevailed at Corinth, because they were carnal and walked as men. It is indeed exactly what men do when cleavages appear in their clubs or political parties, but so it is not to be amongst the saints of God. There are great spiritual resources available for us in Christ and in the Spirit of God — resources of grace and brotherly kindness, of prayerful entreaty and the use of the Scriptures — of which the men of the world know nothing. We need to be thoroughly right ourselves in order to use these resources aright. Let us seek grace to use them, instead of flying to expedients which have no authority in the Word.

We have to remember that we are not under the law, but under grace. For this reason it is unsafe to attempt to use Old Testament laws as a guide to church action. It has been done too frequently in the past, especially when there was a complete lack of New Testament authority for the action proposed. This has gone so far in certain quarters that not many years ago an address was given on Numbers 15: 32-36; and the application made was that a certain brother had allowed to appear in print certain teachings which, while quite orthodox, contradicted what had been said by leaders. Consequently he had broken the sabbath of rest which had been prevailing in their party, and the call was issued that he be stoned to death; i.e., excommunicated. To be consistent the lecturer might have quoted Psalm 137: 9, and applied it to their worldly foes. He would probably have shrunk from doing that. Let us see that we do not invoke the spirit of the law, either towards the world or in the church.

There is much more that might be said as to the administrative side of the mystery. We have made no attempt to cover the whole ground, but have rather touched upon certain points that have a special bearing upon matters that at the present time confront us in rather an acute form, and which are always with us in the background, even if not prominently pressed to the front.

We do press upon our brethren the fact that when differences arise as to matters of reception and

church order and service, the procedure of withdrawing and separating to form a fresh community or party, which is to be free of the thoughts or practices objected to, is not what the truth of Scripture as to the church demands. It is rather just that which it condemns.

We again say that we shall not maintain the truth of the church by doing in practice that which contradicts it.

We ask our brethren to carefully ponder these things.