

Series: *Colossians – Christ Above All*

Title: "Dispensation and Mystery"

Speaker: Dr. Paul M. Elliott

Original Air Date: Week of 3/14/2010

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Introduction

In our last three messages, we began to study Colossians chapter one, verse twenty-four, down through the end of the chapter, at verse twenty-nine. We have focused especially on the doctrine of the church as the Body of Jesus Christ. I've been emphasizing the fact that we are in a section of chapter one where Paul presents his fourth great declaration about the preeminence of the Lord Jesus Christ, and that is the fact that Jesus Christ is preeminent in genuine Gospel ministry.

If a ministry is true to the faith, then Jesus Christ and His inspired, infallible, inerrant Word are paramount in that ministry. He and His Word have unrivalled first place. There is no competing authority in such a ministry. The preeminence of the Lord Jesus Christ is unchallenged – or if it ever is challenged or threatened, decisive corrective action is taken to restore the supreme authority of Christ and His Word. A church or a ministry that is true to the Lord Jesus Christ will constantly be asking this question about everything it is, everything it says, and everything it does: *Is it Biblical? Does what we are doing, and saying, and preaching, and teaching, uphold and submit to the preeminence of Christ and His Word?*

Today we're going to begin taking a careful look at Colossians chapter one, verses twenty-five through twenty-seven. I want to be especially careful as we consider this section, because in our time there is some wrong teaching about the matters that Paul discusses here. We need to address that, and we need to understand what the Word of God actually says in these verses. We need to make sure that we are not looking at

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these verses through the lens of a system of thinking that is imposed upon the Bible, instead of letting what the Bible actually says control and direct our thinking.

Let me read for you, now, the verses with which we will be dealing, Colossians 1:25-27. Actually, I'm going to begin at verse 24 so we can pick up the context. And I'm reading in the Authorized King James Version because there is one particular word that is used in it that has become a source of great confusion among Evangelical Christians over the past several generations. Colossians chapter one, beginning at verse twenty-four:

Who now rejoice in my sufferings for you, and fill up that which is behind of the afflictions of Christ in my flesh for his body's sake, which is the church: Whereof I am made a minister, according to the dispensation of God which is given to me for you, to fulfill the Word of God; even the mystery which hath been hid from ages and from generations, but now is made manifest to his saints: to whom God would make known what is the riches of the glory of this mystery among the Gentiles; which is Christ in you, the hope of glory.

Paul a *Diakonos*

Let me first of all address some key words within this text. Paul says, in verses 24 and 25, that he has become a minister of the church, which is the Body of Christ. The word that is used for "minister" there is the Greek word *diakonos*, from which we get our English word "deacon". But Paul is not using the word in this context to say that

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he has been made a deacon of the church. Acts chapter six, Philippians 1:1, and First Timothy chapter three make it abundantly clear that there is a distinction between the office of apostle, the office of elder, and the office of deacon.

The primary meaning of the word *diakonos*, or deacon, or as it is translated here, "minister," is that it speaks of someone who executes or puts into effect the commands of another person who is in authority over him. So here is what Paul is saying. He is saying that within the Body of Christ, within the church, he has become a servant. As an apostle of Christ, as a minister of Christ, Paul says, I have become a servant of the church – and specifically I have become a servant of the Lord Jesus Christ, because (verse 18) He is the Head of the Church, and in all things He must have the preeminence. My ministry is genuine Gospel ministry, Paul is saying, because I am functioning as a minister or servant of the Head of the Church.

And it is with this in mind that we come to the next key word in this passage. And that is the word "dispensation." Paul says, verse 25, I became or was made a minister of the church "according to the dispensation of God which is given to me for you" – or as the New King James Bible translates it, "according to the stewardship from God that was given to me for you."

The Dispensation: Fulfilling the Word of God

The word that is translated "dispensation" in the Old King James and "stewardship" in the New King James is the Greek word *oikonomia*. It is the word from which we get our English word "economy." Now this word translated

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“dispensation” has been the source of great confusion in the church over the past several generations. I’m going to get to that in a moment, but first of all, I want to give you the actual meaning of the word in the original language of the Bible.

The Greek word *oikonomia* is used eight times in the New Testament. The word *oikonomia* or dispensation or stewardship can have two different meanings, and the meaning depends on the point of view that the text has in mind. Those two points of view are the point of view of the one who is in authority, and the point of view of the one who is under authority. When the Bible is speaking from the viewpoint of the one who is in authority, *oikonomia* or dispensation is properly translated as “a plan” or “a plan of management.” But when the word is used from the viewpoint of the one under authority, the one who is given responsibility for carrying out the plan, the word is properly translated “task” or “responsibility”.

In Ephesians 1:10, for example, Scripture speaks of *oikonomia* from the viewpoint of God as the one who is in authority when it speaks of the “dispensation of the fullness of the times.” Paul says in that passage that at the decisive moment in God's all-wise and eternal plan — “in the dispensation of the fullness of the times” — Christ will come again and bring the glorious plan of redemption to its final consummation.

But here in Colossians 1:25, the Bible is not using the word *oikonomia* or dispensation from the viewpoint of the one who is in authority, but from the viewpoint of the one who is under authority – in this case, the Apostle Paul. He says that God made him a minister of the church “according to the dispensation of God which is

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given to me for you" – or as the New King James Bible more accurately translates it, "according to the stewardship from God that was given to me for you." In other words, Paul has been given responsibility for the carrying out of a part of God's plan.

And what is that plan? Paul tells us what it is, in the next phrase of verse 25. He says it is "to fulfill the Word of God." In the original language, the word that is translated "fulfill" here can have a number of meanings. It can mean "to fill up to the brim." It can mean, "to consummate." It can mean, "to supply liberally." But in the context of this passage, in the context of Paul's function as a minister, as a man who has been given a responsibility from God to carry out part of His plan, this word "fulfill" has a more specific meaning. It means, "to carry into effect the Word of God" – "to carry the Word of God through to accomplishment" – or "to execute my duty as it pertains to the Word of God."

And what is Paul's duty as it pertains to the Word of God? He tells us in the next verses, beginning at verse 26. Paul says, "I am made a minister, according to the dispensation of God which is given to me for you, to fulfill the Word of God; even the mystery which hath been hid from ages and from generations, but now is made manifest to his saints: to whom God would make known what is the riches of the glory of this mystery among the Gentiles; which is Christ in you, the hope of glory."

The Mystery: "Christ in You, the Hope of Glory"

We need to look at another key word in this passage, and that is the word "mystery." The Greek word is *musterion*, from which we obviously get our English

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word "mystery." Paul speaks of "the *mystery* that was hidden from ages and from generations, but now has been revealed to His saints."

What is a "mystery" in Scripture? A mystery, according to the Word of God, is some aspect of God's plan that was hidden at one point in time, but is later revealed. And what is the mystery of which Paul is speaking here? Well, some commentators try to say that the mystery is that the Gentiles would partake of salvation along with Israel. But that was no mystery. That was never anything hidden. God told Abraham in Genesis chapter 12 that in the Messiah who would come through Abraham's descendants, "all the nations of the earth will be blessed" – not just Israel. And in Isaiah 49 verse 6, God says of the coming Messiah, through Him I will restore the preserved ones of Israel, and, "I will also give Messiah as a light to the Gentiles, that You should be My salvation to the ends of the earth." And although most of God's Old Testament saints were Jews, we read in the Old Testament record of many occasions of individual Gentiles, and even whole Gentile cities, like Nineveh, repenting and turning to the Redeemer.

So the salvation of the Gentiles itself is not the mystery spoken of here. What, then, is the mystery? We have the answer at the end of verse 27: "Christ in you, the hope of glory." The mystery of God's plan that has now been revealed is that the Messiah not only would come to earth, not only would die, not only would be buried, not only would rise from the dead – the Messiah would actually live in each member of His redeemed church during this age. "Christ in you, the hope of glory." We find this confirmed in other passages.

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Let me mention just two of them. In John 14:23 Jesus says, "If anyone loves Me, he will keep My Word; and My Father will love him, and We will come to him and make Our home with him." In Galatians 2:20 Paul says, "I have been crucified with Christ; yet it is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me."

"Christ in you, the hope of glory." Or to translate it more directly, "Christ in you, the guaranteed expectation of glory." That is what Paul is talking about here. That is the mystery that was hidden and is now revealed. In times past, under the old covenant, Christ did not dwell within believers. And the Holy Spirit did not dwell within believers in the Old Testament, except in specific cases for specific purposes. That is why David prayed in Psalm 51, after his great sin, "Do not take Your Holy Spirit from me." That is a prayer that no believer in the Lord Jesus Christ, Jew or Gentile, needs to pray under the New Covenant. Paul says in Ephesians chapter one that the indwelling of the Holy Spirit is the down-payment, or guarantee, of our final redemption – when we will not only have Christ living within these mortal, sinful bodies, but we will be like Christ forever, when we will have glorified bodies like His for eternity. That is the "hope of glory."

Wrong Interpretation of This Passage: How It Begins

Now, I've mentioned that there is a wrong interpretation of this passage that has become popular, and even predominant, in the Evangelical church in the past several generations. And I believe I need to take some time to deal with it and answer it. I'm

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going to begin doing that today, and because of the limits of time I'll need to finish in our next message.

Let me start dealing with it by telling you how the problem begins. How you interpret this passage in Colossians chapter one, and how you interpret several other key passages in the New Testament, depends on how you view another New Testament passage. That passage is a familiar one – 2nd Timothy 2:15. I'm quoting it now from the New King James version: "Be diligent to present yourself approved to God, a worker who does not need to be ashamed, rightly dividing the Word of truth." How you interpret Colossians 1:25-27, and how you interpret a number of other key New Testament passages, depends on whether you have a correct or an incorrect interpretation of the phrase, "rightly dividing the Word of truth." That's the way the phrase is translated in most Bibles. A few translations have it as "rightly handling" or "correctly handling" the Word of truth.

There are two views of this particular phrase, and I'm going to use shorthand names for them for the sake of time.

One is the Dispensationalist view. That view says that "rightly dividing" means, literally, dividing up God's Word – dividing up as in *cutting up*. Let me quote from a dispensationalist spokesman who comments on this verse:

"The Bible student is to very carefully cut and divide the Word of God in order to understand it aright. As an illustration of this, consider the dissection of the human body...In much the same way, when we study

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God's Word we must carefully cut and dissect the Word of truth...May the God of truth enable us to carefully and rightly dissect His precious Word..."

The result of this view is that Dispensationalism teaches a division between what it sees as the Jewish portions and the Church portions of the Word of God. And on that basis, most Dispensationalists teach that there are separate programs for Israel and the Gentile church, extending out into eternity – one group of people in the New Heaven, the other group of people on the New Earth, and there is disagreement among Dispensationalists about who will be where for eternity.

Over against this view is the view that is based on what 2 Timothy 2:15 actually says. And that view is that "rightly dividing" simply means *accurately teaching* God's Word. As a result, in contrast to the Dispensationalist view, this Biblical view teaches that there is one program of God, encompassing both Jew and Gentile, beginning before the foundation of the world and extending out into eternity – and that we will all be together in the New Heavens and New Earth.

"Rightly Dividing" – What Does it Mean?

These are two polar opposite points of view, so they can't both be right. The question is, which one is right? And the answer to that question is a key not only to how you interpret the passage before us in the book of Colossians. It is a key to how you interpret prophetic books and passages throughout the Bible.

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The key to understanding which view is the right view, is to look at the original language of 2nd Timothy 2:15. And this is what we find. The word that is translated "rightly dividing" in the Old and New King James versions, and in several others, is a single word in the Greek. It is a form of the Greek verb *orthotomeo*.

In New Testament times, *orthotomeo* was primarily a civil engineering term. It was used as a road building term. The idea of the word was to cut straight, or to guide on a straight path. The idea is to cut a road straight so that people who will travel over that road will can arrive at their destination directly, without deviation. *Orthotomeo* was also used as a mining term. It meant to drill a straight mine shaft so that the miners can get quickly and safely to the "mother lode."

There is another word in Greek, *katatomeo*, which means "to cut into sections." But that is not the word that the Apostle Paul under inspiration uses here in 2nd Timothy 2:15. Paul is not talking about "rightly dividing" in terms of dissecting the Word of God, or cutting it into sections based on Jew and Gentile or any other criterion. It's interesting that the Apostle Paul does use that other word – *katatomeo*, cutting up – in Philippians chapter 3 and verse 2, where he says, literally, beware of those who would divide you up – in other words, beware of those who would try to make a difference among believers between Jews and Gentiles.

So what is the actual meaning of *orthotomeo* – "rightly dividing" the Word of truth? What is intended is not dividing Scripture, not cutting it up, but teaching Scripture accurately, as a single, unified whole, without being turned aside by false teaching.

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Now, we have to stop here because we're out of time, but in our next message, we're going to see how this applies to Bible prophecy in general, and to the passage we have before us in Colossians chapter one in particular.

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