

The Ministry of the Mystery – Part 2

Ephesians 3:1-13

In Christ, Paul's readers had been united with the Jews into "one new man," one church, one Body of Christ. In verse one of chapter three, Paul wished to share a prayer on his heart for the Ephesians.

¹For this reason I, Paul, the prisoner of Christ Jesus for the sake of you Gentiles ... – verse 1

But, when Paul heard himself mention his incarceration, he was concerned that his readers might be distressed. He did not want that, so he digressed into an explanation of the privilege he identified with his ministry and whatever difficulties might go with it. His imprisonment evidenced the glory of his calling. That's an interesting perspective in our age of pragmatism that measures the worth of all things by whether or not they appear to be successful as the world measures success.

Last week, I touched on a few key phrases Paul used that seem to convey a selfless and refreshing attitude toward serving others that would prove very useful to us today were we to recapture it. First, Paul was humbled that God chose him, a former enemy and a powerless sinner, to be the herald of the amazing news that God had called Gentiles into His nation of faith as more than equals with the Jews. "Although I am less than the least of all God's people, this grace was given me: to preach to the Gentiles the unsearchable riches of Christ, ⁹and to make plain to everyone the administration of this mystery, which for ages past was kept hidden in God, who created all things" (Ephesians 2:8, 9).

Paul was humbled that God gave him such a unique ministry, but we considered that there might also be unique dimensions to our own areas of service to the church, at least within a local church. We are not gifted the same, but we have all be gifted for the same reason, to serve to the body of Christ. Paul saw his ministry as "for the sake of you Gentiles." Then, as his thought digressed, he added in verse 2, "Surely you have heard about the administration of God's grace that was given to me *for you* ... " Gifts to serve are given in the church "for the common good ..." (1 Corinthians 12:7). Our gifts are not for drawing attention to ourselves but for building up others.

I suggested that ignoring the common good in our modern considerations of the Spirit's work has created a "me and You, Lord, me and You, me and You approach to Christianity." The modern Christian seems preoccupied with his own development, his own personhood in Christ, his own maturity, his own personal walk with God, his own prayer life, his own family, his own health and his own prosperity. I suggested that this spiritual narcissism has a couple of unfortunate side effects.

The first is that it distorts how a man views the church. He sees it through consumer eyes rather than through a lens that reflects the responsibility of servant, family member and citizen. Secondly, such narcissism corrupts the proper motives behind service and sacrifice to God. Some give in order to get and serve in order to advance rather than simply do these things because they are right in God's eyes.

Finally, we considered Paul's perspective of his task as a gift and privilege that completes God's calling of a new man in Christ rather than burdens him with an obligation to be resented and resisted. God predestined that those who place their faith in Jesus would be not only saved, but also saved for good works. Works of the kingdom are the only vocation in life that can bring joy and completeness to an authentically redeemed nature. What a contrast this perspective is to the spirit that has to be coerced, that is easily put out, that demands to be praised, that looks around at what others are doing and not doing and that places limits and conditions on our service.

It should all be about the work of Christ. When we come to see that, the vain and self-centered motives behind much service to God will begin to fade away. The tedium of labor will dissolve into the love of the work of the Kingdom of God and into the wonder of what we have been called to do.

That's enough of a review of last week. Let us now zero in on what this mystery is specifically as well as on the role of the church in making it known to the world and beyond ...

III. The Ministry of God's Mystery as Showcased in the Church

⁴In reading this, then, you will be able to understand my insight into the mystery of Christ, ⁵which 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. – verses 4, 5

A. What Is "A" Mystery?

"Mystery" is the English pronunciation of *musterion*, which was something previously veiled, but now revealed. Paul's audience was familiar with "mystery religions" that revolved around ancient mystical insights that were only known by those who were somehow "initiated" into knowledge. Paul did not shy away from such language, but his depiction of the unveiled mystery of Christ differed significantly from the alleged unveiling of the so-called mysteries of the pagans. Human initiation ceremonies and weird incantations made no difference to God. By grace, and through the ministry of the Spirit, God revealed His mystery to the first century apostles and prophets. Something never before grasped by the nation of Israel or by any Gentile people group was unveiled to Paul and others like him.

We emphasize the "mystery" of a thing from the undiscovered side of the issue. Once the solution to a thing is found out, we no longer call it a mystery. To Paul's Greek audience, the mystery would still be designated a mystery even after the truth was known. That may sound picky, but understand that this mystery is not a mystery at all as we use the word. Through Paul and others, God made His eternal plan known. We're not waiting to find out something new. It is our obligation as Christians simply to live according to what is no longer hidden.

B. So, What Is "This" Mystery that We Are Now Compelled to Honor

⁶This mystery is that through the gospel the Gentiles are heirs together with Israel, members together of one body, and sharers together in the promise in Christ Jesus. –verse 6

Was the mystery simply that God would bless the Gentiles? That wasn't really hidden. When God promised to bless Abraham's offspring, He also promised to bless all the nations of the world through him. From time to time, the Old Testament prophets would reflect that expectation as well. Elsewhere, Paul cited the prophet Hosea when he addressed God's intentions for the Gentiles:

²⁵As he says in Hosea:

"I will call them 'my people' who are not my people; and I will call her 'my loved one' who is not my loved one,"

²⁶ and,

"It will happen that in the very place where it was said to them, 'You are not my people,' they will be called 'sons of the living God.'" – Romans 9:25, 26

In their nationalistic fervor, many Jews overlooked that detail of the covenant, denying any glorious future for the Gentiles. But, among those who knew and trusted the Holy Scriptures of Israel, one did not have to be particularly “enlightened” to know that God had good things in store for the Gentiles.

So, what was it specifically that had been hidden from men of other generations, but was made known in the age of Paul and that should remain perfectly well known to and honored by believers today now that it has now been revealed in Jesus? It was not that one supreme race of man had been chosen to magnanimously bring peace and blessing to the rest of mankind. It was not that the Jews and the Gentiles would one day be two equally blessed nations existing side by side. The mystery was that the blessing would come by virtue of their being united into one new entity, the church.

It might be easy to think that the gathering of the Gentiles was some sort of a Plan B that kicked in after the Jews rejected *messiah*. After all, the mission strategy of the book of *Acts* was to preach to Jewish first and only then to Gentile. But, none of this was an afterthought. None of this took God by surprise. It was His plan from the outset, a mystery hidden during His dealings with Israel, but out of the bag now and for good. God created one new Christian race out of Jews and Gentiles. Gentiles are, according to verse 6: “heirs together,” “members together” and “sharers together” with Israel. All three of these terms are single words in the Greek that share a common prefix that means “with.”

The Gentiles are co-heirs or “heirs with” the Jews in the spiritual Israel, which is the church. To be an heir denotes an inalienable right of kinship. Gentiles did not have to enter God’s kingdom by becoming Jews. Some Jewish Christians in Paul’s day wanted to make Gentiles become Jews when they became Christians, but that notion was shot down by a council of church leaders in Jerusalem, not to mention every time Paul took up the subject in a letter. In chapter 2:11 of this letter, Paul referenced the haughty way that Jews referred to themselves as “the circumcision” and to the Gentiles as “uncircumcised.” Under the unveiled mystery, that distinction was rendered void.

For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision has any value. The only thing that counts is faith expressing itself through love. – Galatians 5:6

The Gentiles are co-members or “members with” the Jews in the one Body of Christ, which again, is the church. This is a more intimate picture of their oneness. Every believer enters the church by faith in Christ. They are baptized by one Spirit into one body. All their previous distinctions are to be considered obliterated. All Israel’s earlier advantages are now irrelevant.

The Gentiles are co-sharers or “sharers with” the Gentiles in all the promises that come when one belongs to Jesus. Both are saved from his past sins. Provision is made for future sins. Heaven is their prize. The Holy Spirit is the seal of their salvation and the down payment on their inheritance. That one same Spirit provides to any believer, Jew or Greek, comfort, guidance and spiritual fruit.

This is basic stuff. The gospel is for all people. That’s no mystery at all as we use the term. Still, for centuries, neither Jew nor Gentile could conceive of such a oneness. I said earlier that the issue facing us today is not to grasp the mystery, but to live it. You may ask, “What’s so tough about that?” We are Gentiles, but surely, we could get along with any Jewish believers that cross our paths. Bear in mind that in this context, Paul was only talking about one dimension of unity - Jew and Gentile -but the mystery applies more broadly than that, and today, we have many more walls to tear down.

Ephesians is about a Father Who is bringing everything in this divided and chaotic creation into a state of beauty and oneness. The ancient rift between Jew and Gentile may have nothing to do with you, but other hostilities in you may be undermining God's showcasing of oneness through you. You are God's child if Christ's righteousness covers your sin, but bear in mind; every other believer on this planet came to God the same way. You belong to them as surely as you belong to Jesus.

Paul worded God's mystery in its briefest form in Colossians 1:27, simply as "Christ in you, the hope of glory." There is no conflict between the mystery described that way and how it is described here for the specific context of Jew and Gentile. For every race, gender, generation and class, Christ is the hope of glory. We all come to the Father through Christ alone. We meet at Christ, the chief cornerstone of the church. Consequently, we belong to one another. We must live that way.

C. How Is the Church God's Declaration of His Mystery?

¹⁰His 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, ¹¹according to his eternal purpose which he accomplished in Christ Jesus our Lord. ¹²In him and through faith in him we may approach God with freedom and confidence. – verses 10-12

"Church" is *ecclesia*, meaning, "those called out." The church is God's one new man, called out from this world to live before the world as a holy race. The angels announced some really neat stuff from God to man. According to Hebrews, they were the mediators of the Old covenant between God and Israel. Angels appeared to saints of old. Angels announced the birth of John the Baptist and that of Jesus Himself, but their insight into God's workings was not exhaustive. On matters of God's wisdom in sending Jesus, Peter wrote, "Even angels long to look into these things" (1 Peter 1:12).

Here, the church is depicted as announcing "the manifold wisdom of God" to "the rulers and authorities in the heavenly realms," which was a rabbinical reference to angelic orders. Through the very existence of the church (one new people from many), God's power to restore is showcased, and God's holy angels are privy to a show that even they could never have imagined. It must have been a nice little surprise for them, for it likely that what they see more often is akin to a cartoon I ran across. Church-planting plans have screeched to a halt as the pastor explains to the benefactors: "The team is divided on whether to call the new congregation 'First United Church' or 'United First Church.'" There is a basis for the unity of all creation, and that basis is reverence for Jesus, our meeting point.

"Manifold" in verse 10 means multi-faceted, multi-colored, or much varied. God's wisdom is diverse enough that He can carry on fellowship with every believer of every race, class or gender. Though we are individuals about whom God cares deeply, He does not care about any of us more as individuals than He cares about all of us as His holy community. This is a lesson that is too often lost on the modern believer with his consumerist way of looking at only how the church exists to serve him but who seems totally clueless as to how he exists for the building up of God's community.

One especially precious dimension of God's manifold wisdom is reflected in verse 12. In Christ, every believer is now on the same footing with God in that he can "approach God with freedom and confidence." We can come to our Father and know that He hears us. Not all fathers are like that.

A young man was having some money problems, and needed \$200 to get his car fixed and road-worthy again but had run out of people to borrow from. So, he calls his parents via the operator, reversed the charge and said to his dad, "I need to borrow two hundred dollars."

At the other end, his father says, "Sorry, son, I can't hear you. I think we have a bad connection."

The boy shouts, "Two hundred. I need two hundred dollars!"

"Sorry, I still can't hear you clearly," says his father.

The operator cuts in, "Sorry to butt in, but I can hear him perfectly."

The father says, "Good. Then you send him the money!"

We come to our heavenly Father with "freedom and confidence." "Freedom" implied the freedom to speak to a superior. This clearly established freedom to address a powerful ruler produces a "confidence" in his presence that would not otherwise exist. No presence is more terrifying to a sinner than the presence of holiness, but because of Christ's work that renders us holy, not only are we free to take the burdens of our hearts to God, we are invited to do so. "Cast all your anxiety on him because he cares for you" (1 Peter 5:7). Taking our sins, Jesus won for us access to God.

Our text concludes with the words: "I ask you, therefore, not to be discouraged because of my sufferings for you, which are your glory" (verse 13). Again, his reader's potential distress over his imprisonment is why Paul digressed from a prayer that he began in verse one and that he will now resume in verse 14. Prison did not distress Paul, so it certainly should not distress his readers. It was Paul's position that he suffered because God had honored him with a great task.

Nobody conned or coerced Paul into suffering for Christ. It was His great pleasure. As he wrote in Colossians 1:24, he gladly filled up in his own flesh any suffering required for the well-being of the church, the called-out, one new man of God. It's existence and health was that important, for it would become the showcase that God planned in eternity past for demonstrating His manifold wisdom and His power to put back together a world that sin had torn apart. Our duty should be clear. If, for some reason it is not, Paul will spell it out in the next chapter:

¹As a prisoner for the Lord, then, I urge you to live a life worthy of the calling you have received.

²Be completely humble and gentle; be patient, bearing with one another in love. ³Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace. – Ephesians 4:1-3