

BUILDING BIBLICAL
COMMUNITY in CHRIST

The Worlds Greatest Mystery
Ephesians 3:1-13

Introduction

A little over a year ago, I had a discussion with a friend about the importance of the local church. A few days later, I received this email in return which I share with you in part (having received his permission to do so):

As I have said more than a few times before...I have not been able to bring myself to the place in my thinking that I can abide the thought of joining and being involved in another Christian fellowship, a "Church".

Thankfully this is an area of my Christian life where others do confront me about being in sin. But I say that I am very much in touch with God about this sin, and, as I tell my Christian confronters: "He and I go 'round and 'round about it"; I am thankful for grace! God and I are discussing this and I am openly musing about it and even confronting myself about it with you and others, too.

And I am not totally off the hook with God because he says in His Word that we are not to forsake the gathering together for worship and etc., but I am a member of "the mystical body of believers", The Church of Jesus.

I have trod this difficult and lonely road away from vibrant official Church fellowship for about five years now. But, you know, there wasn't much of it there when I was there, so I am saying two things: 1) I am away from mainstream local Church fellowship, and, 2) One of the reasons is the fact that what's there is not so hot anyway.

Be in touch with your thoughts and feedback.

May God always bless, make wise, and protect those who are Heaven-bound!

Maybe you have felt this way at times. Maybe you feel this way today: “After all, what’s there is not so hot anyway!” I believe the antidote to this situation is to understand who we are together in Christ and the central role of the church (yes, even the local church) in the fulfillment of God’s purposes. And that’s what Paul helps us understand in verses 1-13 of chapter 3.

For this reason I, Paul, the prisoner of Christ Jesus for the sake of you Gentiles- (3:1)

Because of the peace made between Jew and Gentile (which Paul describes in 2:11-22), he now turns to pray, just as he did at the end of chapter 1. We’ll talk more about his prayer next week. But for now, let me ask you: Do you ever get distracted when you pray? Finally, you get a few moments away, alone where you can just talk to the God. Or maybe you plan a more extended time...and then, before you know it, your mind begins to wander. Everything you would never have thought of at another moment suddenly comes flooding in on your mental air waves. Well, take heart! Something similar happened to Paul, the great Apostle! Here he bows to pray for these believers (v 1), and he doesn’t return to his prayer until verse 14 (“*for this reason I kneel before the Father...*”). The difference is, it’s not his own thoughts, but the thoughts of the Holy Spirit that lead him into a thirteen verse parenthesis in which he gives a more complete explanation of the unique revelation that has been entrusted to him and the other prophets and apostles.

Before moving into these verses, however, notice how Paul describes himself in verse 1 – “*I, Paul, the prisoner of Christ Jesus...*” Humanely speaking, Paul wasn’t the prisoner of Christ, but of Nero. But Paul never viewed life’s circumstances from that perspective. For him, whether he had plenty or little, whether in prison or not, he first of all belonged to Jesus Christ. As a result, the physical, material circumstances of his life – however difficult – were of little significance.¹

What about you? Do you view your life that way? Some of you are feeling “imprisoned” in your circumstances. I know I have felt that way in recent months. There are times in our lives when we are confronted by the brutal reality of circumstances that, on the one hand seem to be more than we can

bear, and on the other hand we recognize cannot and will not be changed. In moments like that we feel like a “prisoner.” For Paul, the outlook was not very bright. But here’s the key to peace and acceptance: *he didn’t see himself as a prisoner of his circumstances, but as a prisoner of Jesus Christ.*

As we look more closely at Paul’s “parenthesis” in verses 2-13, we discover just *why* Paul viewed himself as ultimately a “prisoner of Christ Jesus.” What he says divides nicely into two sections, set apart by the same phrase in each: “*God’s grace that was given to me...*”: Notice verse 2 – “*Surely you have heard about the administration of **God’s grace that was given to me for you...***” And then again in verse 7 – “*I became a servant of this gospel by the gift of **God’s grace given me through the working of his power...***”

In the first paragraph, Paul is talking about the *revelation* that he had received. And in the second, he is talking about the *commission* that he had received. In verses 2-6, a *mystery is revealed* to Paul. And in verses 7-13 a *ministry is entrusted* to Paul.ⁱⁱ And these two are inseparable. Revelation and commission go hand in hand. To the degree that God has entrusted to you his *revelation* (which he has), you have also received a *commission* to make that known to others.

THE REVELATION OF THE MYSTERY (2-6)

Let’s look first at the *mystery* that is revealed to Paul in verses 2-6. And as we read these verses, notice how often we find this key word “mystery” in these verses:

*2 Surely you have heard about the administration of God's grace that was given to me for you, 3 that is, the **mystery** made known to me by revelation, as I have already written briefly. 4 In reading this, then, you will be able to understand my insight into the **mystery** of Christ, 5 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. 6 This **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.*

In Paul’s Greek text this word “mystery” is used three times in these verses:

... the **mystery** made known to me by revelation, as I have already written briefly (verse 3).

In reading this, then, you will be able to understand my insight into the **mystery** of Christ... (verse 4)

It is actually not found in verse 6 (being supplied by the translators). But it is found again in verse 9:

...and to make plain to everyone the administration of this **mystery**, which for ages past was kept hidden in God, who created all things.
Verse 9

Everybody loves a mystery. (By the way, the last time I talked about Justin's love of the Hardy Boy books, the Marcy family sent him a new addition to his collection!) But the world's greatest mystery is something quite different than what we think of when we hear that term. "Mystery" in the Bible doesn't mean something that is dark, obscure, occult, clandestine or puzzling like a maze or labyrinth. The idea of "mystery" here simply means *a truth that was not previously revealed, but now made known*. It also carries the idea of something that is impossible for man to comprehend or penetrate on his own; it must be revealed by God.ⁱⁱⁱ

What then is this "mystery?" Paul tells us in unmistakable terms in verse 6:

*This **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.*^{iv}

To be sure we get the point, Paul uses three terms in this one verse that place an emphasis on our "togetherness" in Christ, a togetherness that transcends cultural, ethnic, linguistic, or national boundaries: "*heirs together,*" "*members together,*" and "*sharers together.*" The mystery that was revealed to Paul was this: *All who trust in Christ – whether Jews or Gentiles (of whatever nationality) – enjoy equality and full privileges before God, having been united in this new society called the Church.*

This truth is called a "mystery" because it was hidden in the Old Testament. To be sure, the idea that nations outside of Israel would be saved is made known in the Old Testament. God promises to Abraham that in his descendants "all *nations* would be blessed" (Genesis 12:3). But the idea that the Jewish nation under God's rule would be replaced by a new international

community where the non-Jewish nations would have full equality in the same Body without distinction is a concept completely foreign to the Old Testament. And so Paul says in verse 5:

...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.

Maybe a visual image will help. Up until the time of Christ, God was demonstrating his grace and giving his revelation primarily through the nation of Israel, the Jewish people. But the OT Law proved to be a “wall of hostility” (Ephesians 2:14) between Israel and the nations of the world. However, with the coming of Christ, that “wall” has been torn down. All people can now freely come to God through Jesus Christ. Beyond that, a New Society has been established, called the church, in which Jew and Gentile are on equal footing before God and share the same privileges. We believe that in the future, God will once again be dealing specifically with the nation of Israel (Romans 9-11). But for now, we are in what can be called the “church age.” This is what Paul here calls the “mystery” that has now been revealed.

Maybe you're thinking: “So what? What's the big deal? It's all just a bunch of theology totally irrelevant to me!” Here's the point. History is “His story,” i.e. God's story. Ultimately, it's not about the Neros, the Napoleans, or the Naders. It's not about the kings, queens and those considered by many the VIP's of history. It's not about the great wars and peace treaties that take priority in our history books. Nor is it the pessimistic perspective of the one without God as expressed in Ecclesiastes: “*History merely repeats itself. It has all been done before. Nothing under the sun is truly new*” (Eccl. 1:9 NLT). No, God is at work. Life is not merely a repetition of the past, a cycle of events without meaning. The Bible presents rather a very purposeful, linear view of time and history in which God is at work for the accomplishment of ‘his story’ (verses 9, 11). And for the last two thousand years, at the very center of that story, is the church. Not the buildings and steeples, nor the organizations, denominations and programs...but the multi-national, multi-racial people of God made one by a shared faith in Jesus Christ.

If that is true, how can any Christian not take the church seriously? How can any Christian be content to “individualize” the Gospel into an “I, me and my” experience in isolation from the local expression of the Body of Christ?

How can any Christian remove himself from the local church under the pretense that it is far less than perfect? How can any Christian forsake the “assembling together with other believers” (Heb. 10:25)? If the church is central to history and central to the Gospel (as Paul makes very clear in these verses), it must also be central to our lives!^v

THE COMMISSION TO THE MINISTRY (7-13)

But where there is *revelation*, there is also *responsibility*. If by God’s grace, Paul received this *revelation of the mystery*, it is also by God’s grace that *commissioned Paul to the ministry*. Notice what he says in verse 7:

I became a servant of this gospel by the gift of God's grace given me through the working of his power.

The “mystery” and the “gospel” are one in the same. The mystery is truth revealed *to Paul*. And the gospel is truth preached *by Paul*.^{vi} But the point is this: *this truth has been revealed to Paul only that he might in turn communicate it to others.*

It’s all too easy for some of us to politely excuse ourselves from such a responsibility (i.e. to communicate to others what has, by God’s grace, been made known to us). We might have the tendency to push this off on the apostles or on the pastors of the church or on the missionaries. After all, they are the ones best equipped for such a ministry, or so we think. But I want you to notice how Paul describes himself here (v 8): “Although I am less than the least of all God's people, this grace was given me...”

Paul does something very interesting here. Just to emphasize how small and insignificant he really is (and by contrast how great God’s grace is that enables him and you and me to communicate to others what has been entrusted to us!), he says “*I am the least of all God’s people...*” He actually takes a word, translated “least,” and does what my 12 year-old son often does. He turns it into what we call in English a comparative: literally, “leaster.” The King James rightly translates it: “less than the least.” Some think that Paul is playing off the meaning of his name in Latin, *Paulus*, meaning “little” or “small.” Tradition tells us that Paul was a rather small man, some think with a hunched back. But the idea seems to be not just *physically*, but also *morally* (in light of his previous persecution of believers).^{vii} Paul considered himself the littlest of the little. But the point is

this: *no matter my physical or moral stature, no matter my past or present, God in his grace has chosen to use me to communicate this life-changing message to others.*

Last Sunday evening I saw the Blazers actually win a game, against the Utah Jazz (thanks to the Georgioffs who gave us some tickets!). Though I was in the nose bleed section and couldn't get the full impact of being next to him, I was impressed with the height of the South Korean . Think of it – 7 feet, 3 inches, 230 pounds. And I used to think Shon was tall! That's a lot of flesh moving down the court! Why was he recruited? Well, partly because of his size. It struck me that in God's economy, the criteria are the opposite. God is looking for "small" people. He's looking for people who can say, "He must increase, I must decrease."

Without a doubt, Paul had a very specific role as the "apostle to the Gentiles." You and I are not called to the specific role that Paul had. But to the degree that you and I have been entrusted with *revelation*, we have also been given a *commission* to share the riches of the Gospel with others. This is seen in verse 8 –

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.

Paul's commission was to "preach" or to evangelize. That's what the word means. It means simply "to announce good news." But here Paul describes the good news more specifically as the "unsearchable riches of Christ." He's already told us what these riches are in the previous two chapters: salvation from sin, resurrection with Christ, reconciliation with others, access directly to the Father through Christ, membership in God's family, and the promise of discovering more of his riches throughout eternity. No wonder Paul describes these riches as "unsearchable."^{viii}

What does this mean? Let's try the "in..." words: inexplorable, inexhaustible, incalculable, infinite. Or let's try the "un..." words: unsearchable, unfathomable, untraceable. You get the point? We can't begin to grasp the vast measure of God's riches given us in Christ.

No wonder Paul was so motivated to share this message with the world! He knew first of all that the gospel was truth from God and that *revelation* and *communication* were inseparable. But more than that, the gospel was not

only truth from God but also *riches for mankind*. And given these two motivating factors, nothing could silence the apostles!

But there is a final aspect of the communication of the gospel that we need to notice in verse 10 (an aspect that you and I have probably thought very little about) –

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.

What could Paul possibly mean by such a statement? Apparently, not only is the gospel to be communicated to all nations (as we have just seen), but as people from all nations are added to the church, the “new man” in which reconciliation is experienced, this is in itself in some way a communication of God’s great wisdom to the “rulers and authorities in the heavenly realms.”

When we come to Ephesians 6 we’ll take a closer look at the identity of these “rulers and authorities.” For now, we can simply define them as angels – most likely including the *fallen* angels – that serve as intermediaries of God’s sovereign rule over the world. To the degree that Paul is speaking of fallen angels, they also stand behind the division and alienation in the world.

In contrast to this, the church – God’s new society – stands as an ongoing testimony of God’s manifold wisdom in providing reconciliation. Paul describes God’s wisdom in giving birth to the church as “manifold,” which literally means “many-colored.” It is a word that was used in Paul’s day to describe flowers and beautifully woven carpets. It is also found in the OT as a description of Joseph’s “coat of many colors” (Gen 37:3, 23, 32).^{ix} This is what the church is: a multi-cultural, multi-racial tapestry that stands as a living testimony of God’s reconciling grace. And as the church grows and spreads throughout the world, it is as if a great drama is being enacted before the very spiritual powers that oppose such unity in diversity. You and I are not called in this verse to “preach” to the spiritual powers in the same way that we “preach” the gospel to those without Christ. The very fact of our spiritual unity in Christ *is* preaching to these powers.^x

Finally, notice what Paul says as he concludes in verse 13:

I ask you, therefore, not to be discouraged because of my sufferings for you, which are your glory.

If the church is really all that we have said it is – so central in history, so central to the gospel, and so central even to the unseen world of angelic beings – then you and I should think little of suffering on behalf of church. For Paul, suffering on behalf of the church and its growth was a privilege. Elsewhere, Paul puts it this way:

Now I rejoice in what was suffered for you, and I fill up in my flesh what is still lacking in regard to Christ's afflictions, for the sake of his body, which is the church. Colossians 1:24

This verse has always puzzled me and we cannot go into a detailed explanation here. Suffice it to say that Ephesians 3:13 is an example of Colossians 1:24. Paul wrote both of these epistles from Roman imprisonment. Because of his understanding of the crucial role of the church in God's program, Paul was willing to suffer intensely for the sake of God's people. This included not only being in prison, but also suffering from and persevering through misunderstandings, divisions, and even verbal attacks from other believers. Why? Because it was for the sake of Christ's Body.

INTERVIEW

This morning I would like to interview a couple that I believe has "caught the vision" of Ephesians 3. Mary Alice and I had lunch with them this past week, and as I heard their story I felt the passion and sincerity of their hearts as they have obeyed the commission God gave them. Tony and Risa Hoffman have been serving in a West African country with *Ideas*.

- Tony and Risa, as Paul was commissioned to the Gentiles, you both received God's direction to minister to a specific people in West Africa. Tell us how this came about and how you have seen God at work since you left in obedience to this commission.
- Paul says the he is the "least of all God's people." How have you sensed your weakness in obeying the commission God gave you and how God has intervened in His grace?
- You both have been through some tough times in recent months. What is God saying to you through this and how has God been using it in your lives?

Friend, *never, never, never* give up on the Church! Why, because the church, yes even our local churches, are the hope of the world. God has

given you and me this *revelation* of the church. He has also entrusted us with the *commission* of building his church here and around the world. And He has given us the privilege of suffering in the process for His glory.

ⁱ Cf. Acts 25:11-12; Philem 1:9; 2 Tim 1:8; Eph 4:1. Even Paul's imprisonment was due to the fact that he was teaching the very truths recorded in Ephesians 2, i.e. that the division between Jew and Gentile was abolished in Christ and that both, on equal terms, now have free access to the Father (cf. Acts 21:17ff; 22:21ff.).

ⁱⁱ I depend upon John R.W.. Stott for this outline in his excellent treatment of this section. John R.W. Stott, *God's New Society*, pp 115ff.

ⁱⁱⁱ 1 Corinthians 2:7ff.; Colossians 1:2; Romans 16:25b-26a.

^{iv} Cf. also Colossians 4:3 "*the mystery of Christ.*"

^v Many Christians have been infected with the most virulent virus of modern American life, what sociologist Robert Bellah calls "radical individualism." They concentrate on personal obedience to Christ as if all that matters is "Jesus and me," but in doing so miss the point altogether. For Christianity is not a solitary belief system. Any genuine resurgence of Christianity, as history demonstrates, depends on a reawakening and renewal of that which is the essence of the faith—that is, the people of God, the new society, the body of Christ, which is made manifest in the world—the church. Chuck Colson, *The Body* (Word, 1992), p.32.

^{vi} Stott, 118.

^{vii} 1 Tim 1:13

^{viii} In Paul's version of Job 9:10 the word is "unfathomable:" "*He performs wonders that cannot be fathomed, miracles that cannot be counted*" speaking of the wonders of God's creation. The same word is used in Romans 11:33 – *Oh, the depth of the riches of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable his judgments, and his paths beyond tracing out!*

^{ix} Stott, 123.

^x Cf. 1 Peter 1:12