

The Mystery of Christian Unity, Part 2

Scripture: Ephesians 3:1-14

Code: 49-11

Well this morning we're going to return to Ephesians chapter 3, and I will read the opening six verses one more time. "For this reason I, Paul, the prisoner of Christ Jesus for the sake of you Gentiles—if indeed you have heard of the stewardship of God's grace which was given to me for you; that by revelation there was made known to me the mystery, as I wrote before in brief. By referring to this, when you read you can understand my insight into the mystery of Christ, which in other generations was not made known to the sons of men, as it has now been revealed to His holy apostles and prophets in the Spirit; to be specific, that Gentiles are fellow heirs and fellow members of the body, and fellow partakers of the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel." And we'll stop there at this particular point.

The mystery that the apostle Paul is talking about is clearly stated as the fact, in verse 6, the Gentiles are fellow heirs, fellow members, fellow partakers of the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel. And we are looking at this and discussing this matter of unity in the church because this is that very subject at its most initial point in the history of the church. The challenge in the church, the initial challenge in the church—the life of the church—was to bring Jews and Gentiles together, who for millennia had been violent enemies. The Jews had no interest in the salvation that God offered to the world being given to the Gentiles, as is illustrated by Jonah's attitude. The Jews and the Gentiles were hostile toward each other. The Gentiles had come against Israel on many occasions militarily; they had taken many Jewish lives. They had, in fact, not only come against Israel on their own but they had been used by God as instruments of punishment of Israel. Israel was punished by God through the weapons and the deadly assaults of the nations surrounding Israel.

So for millennia there was deep and profound hostility between the Jews and the Gentiles. Now the Lord is establishing the church, the new man, the one new man mentioned in chapter 2, as I read—the one body of Christ, and Jew and Gentile are united in that one body. That is the mystery of the church. And what do we mean, "mystery"? We saw already that is something hidden, verse 5 says, in the past, and now revealed in His holy apostles and prophets in the Spirit. So when we talk about mystery, we're talking about not something that is to us mysterious but something that was unknown to those in the Old Testament.

Now what was known to them in the Old Testament? That God would save Gentiles, of course, because God's whole purpose in calling Israel as His nation was that they would become the recipients of His divine revelation, and they would take the message of the one true God to the rest of the world. They were always to be a missionary nation. They were a thoroughfare. They were not to take the truth of God and make it their own and demonstrate complete indifference to the nations around them, which is essentially what they did. And not only did they do that, not only did they in some bizarre way harbor the truth of God, but they found themselves drawn into the wretched idolatry of the nations that surrounded them, and were idolatrous and unfaithful to the true God.

So they were unfaithful, and they were certainly unfaithful to take the message of the true God to the

nations around them. That was God's purpose for them—first be faithful, and then take the message to the rest of the nations. We know they did not do that; and as the time and the years went by, they become more and more apostate, more and more alienated from God. They have developed a religion that is ungodly, that has no connection to God whatsoever. The rare reality in the time of Christ would be a true Jew, who really believed the Old Testament, had come by faith to know the true God. That was a very, very rare exception in Israel by the time you come to the New Testament era. But the hostility the Jews had to the Gentiles was cumulative because of all the battles and all the fights and all the mistreatment that had gone on from Gentiles toward the Jews. The hatred ran deep.

Now the Lord is going to create a new humanity, a new entity—and it's going to be the church. And the church is going to be His witness nation in the world. The church is going to live faithfully in the way that Israel did not live. The church is going to be faithful, and the church is going to be a missionary agency to take the gospel to the ends of the earth. So Israel is set aside, and we'll see a little later they were set aside partially and temporarily, not totally and permanently; but they were set aside, and the church was established on the day of Pentecost. And that's what Paul is writing about. He is saying, "We are the new humanity; and if we are going to be the new humanity, made up of Jew and Gentile, then Jew and Gentile have to understand that they are one in Christ.

Now unity is always hard. It's always hard. It's hard at any level, on any front, for any reason. And I think particularly in the day in which we live, when individuality is celebrated to a literally paranoid level, when we are sick with the disease of self-absorption, where one's own personal identity is created in a fantasy world of social media, and everything revolves around the individual—it's very, very difficult to experience unity in that kind of environment, where people are completely consumed with themselves. Because unity only happens when you give up yourself in favor of somebody else, when you look not on your own things but the things of others, when you don't consider yourself more important than others, when you humble yourself, when you love others by setting aside your own will, your own way, your own promotion.

So from an individual standpoint, unity is very difficult in this day and age. And I'm talking not in the sense of the world—of course it's difficult there—I'm talking in the church, because the church is fraught with all of the diseases and illnesses that come to a group of people who are focused on themselves. That is really the greatest barrier to unity. So how do you produce in the church of Jesus Christ selfless, humble, loving people who are far more concerned about others than they are themselves, who hold no grudges, no bitterness, no respect of persons, no wrong attitudes toward anyone? That is a challenge. And the Spirit of God can do that because the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, gentleness, goodness, faith, meekness, self-control; and those kinds of things are manifest in someone who seeks peace and who pursues unity.

But it's very difficult. And you have not only the individuals in this society in which we live thinking the entire world revolves around them, but you also have them collecting into groups that thinks the world revolves around them. I often have to confront the fact—and I said this a few years ago—social justice would do more to destroy the unity of the church than anything I'd ever seen in my life; and that has proven to be the case. Social justice sounds so benign, it sounds so noble; nobody's against society experiencing justice. But social justice is not what you're seeing. Social justice is a deceptive title for what should be called collective envy, collective envy. If you begin to label things, for clarity, with biblical terminology, you know how to deal with them.

If somebody talks about social justice, you can't find a framework in Scripture to address that at that level; but if you understand what you're seeing in this is collective envy that has not necessarily risen out of the hearts of people, but it's been foisted upon them—it's been sold to them for divisive purposes. It shakes the fist in the face of God and says, "God, I don't like my history, I don't like my past, I don't like the things that have gone on in my progeny, and I don't like what happened to my people," or, "I don't like where I am in life." You're shaking your fist in the face of a sovereign God who brought you to where you are by the history that He prewrote in eternity past.

And it's really a better approach to these kinds of things to see individuals as completely consumed with self-centeredness, and then collecting into groups and a kind of collective envy that becomes even violent because it turns so readily and so easily and so simply to anger, anger. If you're angry with the past, then you're going to have a hard time trusting God for the future. And where the church needs to be brought together as one, there are many who out of this envy and anger are creating immense division.

Paul is dealing with this at its base level. And the toughest thing, it was at the very beginning: How do you bring together Jews and Gentiles who have been hostile haters, mutual haters of each other for millennia? That's the issue. Paul has a tremendous responsibility. This is a huge responsibility.

You understand why Paul felt so deeply about this when you recognize that it cost him his freedom, and then it cost him his life. I mean, the whole episode that got him to prison—maybe as many as five years in prison by the time he writes Ephesians, Colossians, Philemon—the whole episode that got him to prison was that the Jews tried to kill him in a mob action in Jerusalem for preaching that Gentiles were acceptable to God. The Romans rescued him from the mob. And again, they were trying to kill him for saying God was bringing Gentiles into this new humanity called the church. That's how disastrous such a thought was to Jewish people, and even Jewish believers. It cost him his freedom, and then it cost him his life when an executioner chopped his head off in prison in Rome.

Unity is very difficult, and particularly difficult when you have generations and generations and generations of hostility. And that is why the only way this unity can be produced is on a supernatural level. So where you don't see it, you know that people are not submitting to the Spirit of God. Look over at chapter 4 for a moment, verse 3: "[Be] diligent to preserve the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace." How do you do that? Verse 2, "With all humility and gentleness, with patience, showing tolerance for one another in love." It can only be produced by the Holy Spirit. It is a supernatural reality.

When you look even now at a church—you look at this church, you take a look at this church, and you say, "What in the world ties these people together? They come from all kinds of backgrounds. Who knows what happened in your background, or back in the history of the nations your ancestors came from? Who knows what hostilities existed then or existed even in more modern times?" But all of a sudden there's this mass of people who've come together from every tongue and tribe and people and nation, and they're one body in Christ, one body by the power of the Holy Spirit, worshipping the one true God, and loving each other, and serving each other. That is a supernatural work.

The great challenge for Paul was not just preaching the gospel to the Gentiles—and that was a challenge, believe me, because he was persecuted by the Gentiles for his message of the gospel.

But I think an even greater challenge was getting the Jews and the Gentiles to accept each other, to accept each other in the body of Christ. And the reason I say that is because he deals with it in chapter 2, he deals with it in chapter 3, and then he deals with it in chapter 4. It's as if he just cannot let go of this very difficult issue.

Now let's be clear. The Old Testament was very direct in saying Gentiles would be brought to know God, that salvation would come to the Gentiles. I gave you a lot of Scripture on that last time. But listen to Malachi, the last book of the Old Testament, chapter 1 and verse 11: "For from the rising of the sun even to its setting"—this is God speaking—"My name will be great among the nations, and in every place incense is going to be offered to My name"—that is, there's going to be worship of the true God from every place in every nation—"and a grain offering that is pure"—true worship—"for My name will be great among the nations," says the Lord of hosts."

So clear, unmistakable prophecy that God was going to bring the nations into His presence to express true and pure worship. That's the salvation of the nations—and I gave you a lot of texts from Isaiah: Isaiah 60, Isaiah 49, and other texts from Isaiah that speak to that as well.

So the Old Testament was very clear that God is going to save the world; He's going to save the nations—and He's been doing that. That was supposed to be, of course, His plan and His purpose; and it was, even in the Old Testament. And the people of Israel were to be the instrument, the witness nation. They, as you clearly know, were unfaithful and apostate. The time came when they not only rejected God, not only followed idols, not only hated their neighbors instead of loving them, but they rejected the Messiah. And so on the day of Pentecost the Lord made a new covenant people, a new humanity: the church, the church of Jesus Christ. And we are now one.

And the imagery is a metaphor that's not in the Old Testament. It's—the church is called the body of Christ. That is the most integrated of all metaphors used to speak of people's relationship to each other and to God. In the Old Testament the people of God are called subjects of a kingdom. They're even identified as a bride to God who is the Bridegroom. They're identified as a family. But never is Israel seen as a body. The intimacy and the organic relationships that exist in the church are new in a fresh way, and that is because the Holy Spirit has come in a fullness to bring about this one new man.

Now, Jesus in His prayer in John 17 told us why this was so important, and it's the very reason we exist. Listen to John 17:21; He's praying to the Father, and He says, "[I pray] that they may all be one; even as You, Father, are in Me and I in You, that they also may be in Us, so that the world may believe that You sent Me." So what's at stake here? The world believing that God sent Christ. The whole of Christianity rises or falls on the fact that they are one.

And down in verse 23, He essentially repeats it: "I in them and You in Me, that they may be perfected in unity, so that the world may know that You sent Me, and loved them, even as You loved Me." How is the world going to know that the gospel is true, that God, the God of the Bible, is the true and living God, the only God, and that Christ is the Son of God and the Savior of the world? How is the world going to know that? By the unity of the church.

So obviously this is where Satan attacks. We are not ignorant of his strategies. The church is to be that one new man, something not seen in the Old Testament where Jew and Gentile come together

in one body. There were Gentile proselytes in the Old Testament, there were Gentile believers in the Old Testament who came to the true faith because of the influence of the people of Israel, but not identified in one body. That's why Jesus says in Matthew 16, "I will build My church. I will build My church." He's talking about something He hasn't done: "I will build My church."

And the intimacy of this church is also expressed over in the fifth chapter of Ephesians; if you're there, verse 25, "Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ also loved the church and gave Himself up for her, so that He might sanctify her, having cleansed her by the washing of water with the word, that He might present to Himself the church in all her glory, having no spot or wrinkle or any such thing; but that she would be holy and blameless." Well the church on earth is a far cry from that. But that is the design of the Lord, and that was the desire of the Lord: that the church would be holy and blameless, and would manifest the evidence of the true God and the true Christ and the true Spirit by its unity based on love and humility.

In John 13:34 and 35, Jesus said, "You [are to] love one another By this shall all men know that you are My disciples." This is so basic and so foundational: that Paul was given a ministry that was virtually, apart from the power of God, an impossible task—to bring these Jews and Gentiles, who had been hostile for so long and at a profoundly visceral level of hostility, to bring them together. But it had to be at the end of chapter 1 of Ephesians. You see there that Christ is put as head over all things to the church, which is His body, the fullness of Him who fills all in all. It's the body of Christ, and Christ fills that body because He fills every believer in that body; this is a marvelous reality. And in chapter 4, verse 3 again, we are to be "diligent to preserve the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace [because] there's one body, one Spirit, one hope, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all who is over all and through all and in all." So our unity is spiritual; we all possess the same eternal life. That part of the prayer of our Lord was answered. Every believer in Christ is a believer in whom Christ lives. And so as Christ lives in all believers, we share that common life.

But getting the church to recognize this and conduct themselves in the way that the Lord wanted them was a huge challenge, huge, because the wall was so high. Back in chapter 2, verse 14, Paul talked about a barrier, a dividing wall, between Jew and Gentile. It had to be broken down. The Jews even mocked the Gentiles by calling them the "Uncircumcision," which was a pejorative. The Jews celebrated the fact that, verse 12, "The Gentiles . . . were . . . excluded from the commonwealth of Israel, strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world. But now in Christ Jesus those who were formerly far off"—namely, the Gentiles—"have been brought near by the blood of Christ. He is our peace [and He has torn] down the middle wall, abolishing . . . the enmity," verse 15, "[and making] one new man . . . one body . . . through one Spirit." Chapter 2, verse 18, so the Gentiles are "no longer strangers and aliens, but are fellow citizens with the saints, and are of God's household." So they are part of the household of God.

They're even part of the temple, the holy temple, verses 20 to 22, "Foundation [is] the apostles and prophets, Christ [is] the corner stone, [and] the whole building [of Jew and Gentile] fit together, is growing into a holy temple to the Lord, in whom you also are being built together in a dwelling of God in the Spirit." So from the standpoint of spiritual reality, Jew and Gentile in Christ are one with each other. We know this, but I don't know that in all the years that I've been in ministry there has ever been a moment when there has been what I would call anything approximating unity in the visible church of Jesus Christ.

Now I know there are false churches, there are tares among the wheat. But even, let's say, the

churches that are evangelical, that are faithful to the gospel, can always find ways to split from other groups or within themselves. There just seems to be such a difficult, difficult mountain to climb to experience unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. It takes a tremendous working of the Holy Spirit, and it takes a people who are submissive to the Word of God because the goal of our instruction is love from a pure heart, and love from a pure heart produces the kind of humility and selflessness that builds unity.

But Paul isn't as far along with his people as we are after half a century of studying the Word of God. Paul is going to try to bring the Jew and the Gentile together when there has been nothing but animosity, nothing but animosity, and massive cultural differences, cultural differences by design that totally isolated the Jews, purposely, so they couldn't easily interact with the Gentile because they would then be pulled more easily into idolatry. They had so many traditions that even today when we see one of those rare, anachronistic, orthodox Jews walking around, he looks like he's from another era or another planet. But that adherence to that would have been similarly, completely odd throughout all of their history.

So Paul's task is to bring everyone together. I would love to think that that could be done on a wide scale. I would love to think that we could do something, maybe I could do something and others could do something to pull it off. But I've learned after half a century that I can only affect what I can affect by the instruction of the Word of God and the ministry of the Spirit through the Word. And so my cry, the cry of my heart has always been, "Lord, make this church united; pull us together. Let us love each other. Let us be a living testimony that the Father sent the Son." The gospel is true, salvation's in Christ, and Christ can transform disparate people into those who are one in every sense.

So Paul has made an issue out of this because in the formative time of his life and ministry, this was a very, very challenging task. Now he wants us to understand it; that's what he says in verse 4. I'm saying more because I want you to understand it. Chapter 3 really began with him starting to pray, "For this reason I, Paul, prisoner of Christ Jesus for the sake of you Gentiles—" and then he just stops, and you have a parenthesis from verse 2 to 13. And he picks up the prayer in verse 14 again by saying the same thing, "For this reason I bow my knees before the Father." It's as if he says, "I'm ready to pray that you'll understand this—oh, I don't think I can do that yet; I have to tell you some more. You don't know enough; you don't know enough. That prayer can't be answered unless you have further revelation." So that's why he unfolds this mystery in these opening thirteen verses.

Now we started last time with the first point, the prisoner of the mystery, the prisoner of the mystery; and this is really important. Paul introduces himself, "I, Paul, the prisoner of Christ Jesus." In chapter 4, verse 1, "Therefore I, the prisoner of the Lord." He is not talking about some spiritual relationship; he is a prisoner. He is in a prison. And as I said, he may have been there as much as five years. And the reason he's in that prison is because the Romans rescued him from a mob of Jews in Jerusalem who were going to kill him, murder him on the spot. They took him into protective custody, and then they had him on their hands. They finally take him to prison in Rome, and in his imprisonment he writes this wonderful epistle.

So when he says, "I am a prisoner," he means, "I am a prisoner of Christ Jesus for the sake of you Gentiles because I am preaching Jew and Gentile are one in Christ. This is what has led to my imprisonment. This is how distasteful this was to the Jews, that they would have killed me if the Romans hadn't rescued me, put me in protective custody. And once they had me in custody, then all

the accusations kept flying.” You know all the trials in the book of Acts—Festus, Felix, Agrippa—and all the accusations against him. The Romans don’t know what to do with him; they finally take him on a ship to Rome, where eventually he loses his life to an axe.

But look at Colossians. While he was writing Ephesians, he wrote Colossians. In chapter 1, verse 24, “Now I rejoice in my sufferings for your sake”—this is the suffering of being in prison—“and in my flesh I do my share on behalf of His body”—“I’m suffering on behalf of His body.” Again, he’s back to this same idea that it’s because of the body of Christ being made up of Jew and Gentile, which is the church. “It’s because of my ministry to try to bring Jew and Gentile together in the church that I am literally”—“filling up what is lacking in Christ’s affliction.” What he means by that is they can’t get to Christ; “He’s not here, so they’re coming after me. They hated Christ, they killed Christ, He ascended; they can’t get to Him, so they’re coming after me with their animosity and their hatred.”

But verse 25, “[However, on behalf of the church,] I was made a minister according to the stewardship”—or the administration; this is the particular task—“from God bestowed on me for your benefit”—the benefit of you Gentiles—“so that I might fully carry out the preaching of the word of God.” He says, “Look, I was made a minister according to a divine stewardship that God bestowed on me to bring the message of the Word of God to you Gentiles for your spiritual benefit.” Verse 26, again, the same language as in Ephesians: “That is, the mystery which has been hidden from the past ages and generations, but has now been manifested to His saints”—what is the mystery?—“to whom God willed to make known what is the riches of the glory of this mystery among the Gentiles, which is Christ in you, the hope of glory.” This is the mystery that is so intolerable to the Jews: that Christ would live in the Gentiles, and they would have the same hope of glory.

“So,” Paul says, verse 28, “we proclaim Him, admonishing every man”—Jew or Gentile—“teaching every man with all wisdom, that we may present every man”—Jew or Gentile—“complete in Christ. For this purpose also I labor, striving according to His power, which mightily works within me.” I mean, this is an overwhelming burden on this man. All the hate, all the hostility, all the imprisonment, all the trials—just because he wanted to bring Jew and Gentile together.

You would have to think the devil would do anything he could to stop this. Well yes, since we read from the lips of our Lord Himself that it is by unity that the world knows that the Father sent the Son. So of course, what does the enemy want to do but sow disunity everywhere among those who name the name of Christ.

So Paul, before he can pray—let’s pick it up in verse 2 a little more about the prisoner of the mystery: “If indeed you have heard of the stewardship of God’s grace which was given to me for you.” He reminds them that everybody knew this. Everybody knew that he had been given a stewardship, a certain administration, a certain role in the kingdom. And that role, by the grace of God given to him, was for the Gentiles, was for the Gentiles. It was a ministry by grace to take the gospel to the Gentiles.

When he was on the Damascus Road, you remember the Lord said to him, “You’re going to take the message to the Gentiles.” This was his calling. And of course in 1 Corinthians 4:1 and 2, “It’s required of stewards that a man be found faithful.” It’s the same term: “This is my administration; this is my stewardship, and I must be faithful.” This was a difficult, difficult task.

People pastoring a church struggle to unify the church. People in a marriage or a friendship struggle to continue unity in a relation. Imagine trying to bring together two disparate groups of people who are hostile toward each other for centuries. But that was Paul's task; that's the stewardship that the Lord had given to him. And it was very challenging. "You've heard of it," he says in verse 2, "that it was given to me." And verse 3, this is really important, "That by revelation there was made known to me the mystery, as I wrote before in brief"—probably referring to chapter 1 and verses 9 to 12, where he talks about it.

So he's saying, "Look, this isn't something somebody told me God wanted me to do; this is direct revelation, this is direct revelation." That story of the revelation of the calling of Paul is found in the ninth chapter of the book of Acts, where he's on the road to Damascus, and he's interrupted by Christ—and you remember the story. But that encounter on the Damascus Road, as dramatic as it was, and as saving as it was, wasn't the end of his preparation for this particular stewardship.

Turn in your Bible to the first chapter of Galatians, and listen to Paul's testimony, starting in verse 11. In verse 11 of chapter 1 of Galatians, "I would have you know, brethren, that the gospel which was preached by me is not according to man. For I neither received it from man, nor was I taught it, but I received it through a revelation of Jesus Christ." There is no New Testament; if Paul is going to preach the gospel, then the Lord is going to have to tell him what the gospel is, and the Lord is going to have to give him a direct revelation about that and a direct revelation about his particular responsibility as the apostle to the Gentiles and the one who is supposed to proclaim Jew and Gentile one in the body of Christ. There was nowhere to go to get this message. In fact it was so alien, it was so difficult a message, that no one ever would have imagined it. So he received it through a revelation, verse 12, of Jesus Christ.

Verse 13, "For you have heard of my former manner of life in Judaism, how I used to persecute the church of God beyond measure and tried to destroy it." This is as startling as anything else I've said up to now. The Lord doesn't pick somebody who had had some experience in conciliating Jews and Gentiles. You get that? No, He didn't pick somebody who had showed he could broker a relationship. He picks a Jew who was killing Gentiles to be the reconciling minister. And in fact, he says, "I was advancing in Judaism beyond many of my contemporaries among my countrymen, being more extremely zealous for my ancestral traditions." He says more about that in Philippians. He was fanatical, Pharisaical, fanatical Judaism. And God selects a fanatical Jew who hates Gentile[s], and who is as extreme a legalist as is possible, to be the one to preach that Jew and Gentile are one in Christ.

Now how does he convince Paul to do this? It wasn't easy, verse 15, "But when God, who had set me apart even from my mother's womb"—he knows he was ordained from his mother's womb to this—"and called me through His grace, was pleased to reveal His Son in me so that I might preach Him among the Gentiles, I did not immediately consult with flesh and blood." Why? Well who would he go to?

When he finally does get to Jerusalem a number of years later, they don't like the idea that Gentiles are to be accepted into the body of Christ even then. So who's going to come and be an ally to him? No one necessarily. So what do you do? He said, "I didn't go to Jerusalem to those who were apostles before me. I didn't even go to the apostles because the message would probably not be understandable to them. I went away to Arabia"—Nabataean Arabia, east and south from the land of Israel—"and returned once more to Damascus. Then"—verse 18—"three years later I went to

Jerusalem.” Oh.

How long did it take for Paul to get this through his thick skull? Apparently three years before he was going to test-drive this in Jerusalem. This is just too extreme, too extreme. So he’s converted; he goes to Arabia; at some point he comes back to Damascus. Three years of divine revelation from Christ to transform this killer of Gentile Christians into one who’s the apostle to the Gentiles and has the responsibility to bring Jew and Gentile together in the church.

So back to verse 3 of Ephesians 3, “By revelation was made known to me the mystery, as I wrote in brief. By referring to this, when you read you can understand my insight into the mystery of Christ.” “The Lord gave me insight”—*sunesis*—“the Lord gave me understanding over all that period of time, that the mystery of Christ was to be the message to preach, which in other generations,” verse 5, “was known.” And the ministry of Paul is to preach Christ to the Gentiles, and to the Jew and Gentiles, that there is one body of Jew and Gentile, one in Christ.

Now that’s the prisoner of the mystery. At least let me give you a second point: the planning of the mystery, verses 5 and 6, the planning of the mystery. And this is pretty evident by now. What is a mystery of Christ? It is that “which in other generations was not made known to the sons of men, as it has now been revealed to His holy apostles and prophets in the Spirit.”

So a mystery is not something that is intended to be obscure or oblique. A mystery, specifically the term *mustērion* in the New Testament, refers to something hidden in the past and revealed in the new. Other generations it wasn’t made known; now it is revealed. And he said it was “revealed to His holy apostles and prophets in the Spirit.” By the revelation of the Spirit, all Scripture is given by inspiration of God. All divine revelation comes by the agency of the Holy Spirit.

And it came to the apostles. Now “apostles” in the sense here, as you would obviously know it, of the twelve—minus Judas, plus Matthias, plus Paul—these are chosen men, and there was a criteria for that choice. Listen to 1 Corinthians 9:1; Paul says, “Am I not an apostle? Have I not seen Jesus our Lord?” What was the qualification for an apostle? He had to have seen Christ and seen the risen Christ. And Paul had that experience on the Damascus Road and a couple of other times as well.

So this revelation has been revealed to Paul, and not only to Paul but to the holy apostles as well. The other apostles had come to understand this, but it was Paul’s unique responsibility to go to the Gentiles. And the apostles were then to proclaim this. John gives us a wonderful picture of that, 1 John 1, verses 1 to 3. Here’s John giving us kind of a rundown on the apostles’ ministry. He’s speaking in the plural for himself and the other apostles: “What was from the beginning, what we have heard, what we have seen with our eyes, what we have looked at and touched with our hands, concerning the Word of Life.” The Word of Life is Christ.

So John says, “This is our ministry. What was from the beginning”—first encounters with Christ—“what we heard, what we saw, what we looked deeply into, what we touched with our hands concerning the Word of Life—and the life”—being the life of Christ—“was manifested; we have seen and testify and proclaim to you the eternal life, which was with the Father and manifested to us.” So what the apostles had was a personal manifestation of the incarnate God in Christ.

And then in verse 3, “What we’ve seen and heard we proclaim to you also, so that you may have

fellowship with us; and indeed our fellowship is with the Father, and with His Son Jesus Christ.” So, “We were with Christ; we knew Christ.” That is what defines a true, capital A Apostle.

Now the word *apostle* means “a sent one” or “a messenger.” In 2 Corinthians 8:23, it mentions messengers of the church, or apostles of the church—it’s a small *a*, so that word can have a nontechnical meaning. But here, and in most cases in the New Testament, when it refers to “the apostles,” it is referring to the original apostles to whom was given the revelation of God, and particularly in verse 5 when it says it was “revealed to His holy apostles,” setting them apart with the identification as holy, which means to be set apart.

What did the early church do when it met? Acts 2:42, the first time the early church was meeting, it says, “They gave themselves to the apostles’ doctrine,” the apostles’ teaching. They were the spokesmen for God. There was no New Testament yet. God was revealing His New Testament revelation through the apostles and those associated with them. They were the source of new truth; therefore, they were the source of that which would be considered the mysteries that were now revealed in the New Testament.

But it wasn’t just to the apostles but also prophets. And what are the prophets? That would be preachers, preachers. How do we know that? First Corinthians 14:3 says that the prophets speak for edification, exhortation, and consolation. Theirs is not so much a ministry of divine revelation as the apostles, but rather the speaking of edification, exhortation, and consolation. They preach the already-revealed truth. Occasionally the Lord might give special revelation to a prophet on a practical level, like Agabus, we saw in chapter 21. But there’s no indication of prophets receiving divine revelation the way the apostles did. So the prophets preached the apostles’ teaching, which they received from the Lord Himself.

So John is telling us, basically coming back behind Paul and bolstering Paul’s purpose, we all were called to this: We were all called to proclaim Christ. But Paul particularly had this responsibility of bringing Jew and Gentile together. And that’s what verse 6 is saying: “to be specific, that the Gentiles are fellow heirs and fellow members of the body, and fellow partakers of the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel.” Just an incredibly difficult task.

They’re not proselytes, like Gentiles were in the Old Testament. They’re not strangers; they’re not aliens, like they were in the Old Testament. They’re fellow heirs. That means they’re sons. They have the same legal status; they share the same spiritual benefits. And they are fellow members, “fellow members of the [same] body.” It’s not as if there’s one body for Jews and one body for Gentiles; there’s only one body for both.

Listen to 1 Corinthians 12:12, “Even as the body is one and yet has many members”—that’s the human body—“and all the members of the body, though they are many, are one body, so also is Christ. For by one Spirit we were all baptized into one body, whether Jews or Greeks, whether slaves or free, we were all made to drink of one Spirit. For the body is not one member, but many.” Whatever you are—Jew, Greek, bond, free—you’re in Christ; you’re in one body. So we are fellow heirs—we have the same legal status; we are fellow members—we have the same life status; and fellow partakers of the promise, meaning we have the same inheritance, the same inheritance—which is to say that all the promises of blessing, ultimately, to Israel are also going to be to the Gentiles who also come under God’s blessing through salvation.

I think we know that the Jews didn't want the Gentiles receiving the blessings that were promised to Abraham and David and the prophets. They were outside the covenant. But in the church, we all share the same legal status, the same life status, and the same inheritance. We're all one. And this was the hardest unity to get across, the hardest message. You would think if they got it in the early church—and they did eventually—we would figure out the lesser challenges of division that face us in this day.

In Romans chapter 11—just kind of wrapping up—in Romans chapter 11, verse 13, Paul says, “I am an apostle of Gentiles, I magnify my ministry.”—“I’m an apostle of Gentiles, I magnify my ministry, if somehow I might move to jealousy my fellow countrymen and save some of them.” That is a strange statement, isn't it?

Now, we know that his zeal was for Israel. He says that in chapter 10, “My heart's desire and prayer to God for them is their salvation.” Even in taking the gospel to the Gentiles, he was hoping to make the Jews jealous of the blessings that God was pouring out on Gentiles. Strange, isn't it, that jealousy could be a motivation for salvation; but it can be, if you know you're lacking what someone has in Christ.

“I would want somehow to move to jealousy my fellow countrymen and save some of them.” Will that happen? Over to verse 25, “I do not want you, brethren, to be uninformed of this mystery”—of the church. “I don't want you to miss this”—“so that you will not be wise in your own estimation—that a partial hardening has happened to Israel—” OK, let's stop here. Not all Jews, basically, were rejected because the church is made up of Gentile and—what?—and Jews. So the hardening of Israel was only partial, and it was only temporary. Hardening has happened to Israel until the fullness of the Gentiles has come in.

And when the Lord has completed His church, and “the fullness of the Gentiles' [salvation] has come in,” verse 26, “all Israel will be saved.” God is not through with Israel; He's going to go back and save Israel. He is now calling out His church, but His promises to Israel cannot be revoked because the gifts and callings of God are not subject to change.

So when the church is complete and the fullness of the Gentiles has come in, the Lord will then turn to the salvation of Israel, as He promised. In the future they will look on the One they've pierced, and they will mourn for Him as an only son—meaning they'll see Christ for who He was—and salvation will come to Israel, and all Israel will be saved. But at the front end, this was a profoundly difficult ministry. And it cost Paul his life, a price he was willing to pay, because his stewardship was given to him by God.

For us, the gospel is to create a new society. And the last thing that should ever, ever identify us, the last thing that should ever be characteristic of us is disunity, discord, fighting, quarrels, divisions that split Bible studies, Sunday School classes, churches, denominations, institutions. We all need to be pursuing the bond of peace, don't we?—in the Spirit, by love and humility. Much more to say. In fact I said a whole lot of things I hadn't planned to say. Let's pray.

Father, it's a profound experience to sit under the Word of heaven, to sit and open our ears and our minds to hear You speak. We are so weary of men, and the messages of demons, and deception

and the lies. We're so weary of the confusion, the misrepresentation, the false teachers who masquerade as if they represent You. Thank You that Your Word gives a clear truth. At every point it is unmistakable. It is clear because You hold us responsible for understanding it, believing it, and living it.

We have enjoyed, in this church, wonderful and rare, joyful unity; and we ask that You would continue to cause all of us, and each of us, to do all that we can to preserve that, that at least the world that looks at us will say, "That can't be human," and give glory to our Father in heaven, who sent His Son to save us and to make us one in Him. These things we ask in Christ's name. Amen.

Available online at: <http://www.gty.org>

COPYRIGHT (C) 2023 Grace to You

You may reproduce this Grace to You content for non-commercial purposes in accordance with Grace to You's Copyright Policy (<https://www.gty.org/about#copyright>).