

Sermon Notes of Rev.Dr.I.J.W.Oakley (4-2-1996 Guisborough Evangelical Church)

Ephesians 3:1-13

The Mystery of Christ and its Relevance

Introduction

A difficult passage before us – concerning the administration of God’s grace, the revelation of a mystery, the manifold wisdom of God, rulers and authorities in the heavenly realm, and God’s eternal purpose. Paul was so excited at the inclusion of the Gentiles as God’s people, though this means nothing to us. Still it is included in Scripture, so it must be important and relevant to us, and should have a bearing on our daily lives. So will endeavour to make this passage clear, and in the end practical for us.

The term “mystery”

Key word for understanding Paul. Six times in Ephesians alone. In English the term means something dark, obscure, secret, puzzling, that cannot be explained or understood. But in the Bible it means a truth which is unknown at first, and which you cannot work out by human reasoning, but something which God has made known. So everyone knows these things in the church now.

The mystery is God’s plan of redemption in Christ. Before He made the world He foresaw what would happen. Man would fall when sin entered the world. Rescue plan devised. Began plan with Abraham from which Jewish nation came. His special people. Prepared them for future coming of Christ. Made Himself known to them.

Then the heart of the plan was with the coming of the Son of God who, through death and resurrection, dealt with fundamental problem of sin. This was the way not only to forgive them, but also to recreate them.

Then, through the preaching of the Gospel in every generation, God has drawn men and women to His Son for salvation and brought them into the fellowship of His people, the Christian Church. This Church includes not only Jews but Gentiles also. New race and new humanity. This is the new people of God to replace old Israel. And in it Gentiles share same benefits of new covenant, belong to same body, enjoy same promises. Together they share access and boldness into God’s presence.

Then Son of God to return. Judgement. Resurrection of the dead. New heaven and new earth, home of the righteous. God’s glorious kingdom finally established. Evil put down. Life of glory for God’s redeemed people for eternity. So entire universe restored to original perfection.

This is the mystery, the plan executed in and through the Lord Jesus Christ. The mystery is the Gospel message. This is the mystery, the secret plan which God has revealed. At the centre of the mystery is the Lord Jesus Christ. This is not Paul’s opinion or theory. There is no hope for the world apart from Christ. Statesmen, politicians and philosophers can plan and do all they can, but no final solution to this

world's ills, no lasting peace and righteousness, no final destruction of sin apart from Christ – His death, resurrection, return and final triumph. **Jesus said 'I am the light of the world'** (John 8:12).

Do you know the mystery? Are you redeemed in Christ, part of His church, new humanity? Is your hope firmly fixed on Christ's return?

Why was this important to Paul?

There was once a time in Paul's life when such teaching was an anathema. He was a proud self-righteous Pharisee. He hated the very name of Christ and did all he could to destroy His followers. This all changed when Christ appeared on road to Damascus. Apprehended by Christ Jesus. Became willing and devoted bond slave. Christ became his all in all. And preaching the Gospel, declaring the mystery, setting forth Christ's unsearchable riches was the only thing that mattered in his life. He lived to enlighten people about the truth because they were in darkness (Ephesians 3:9).

It cost Him dearly. Therefore he begins this section with "Paul, the prisoner of Christ Jesus". Here he is locked up in Roman jail and soon to give his life for this gospel. He was so committed to the mystery of Christ, so concerned to bring Gospel to Gentiles, so determined not to compromise – that he was now in prison. But his suffering was also for their benefit and glory (Ephesians 3:13).

He did not take his suffering in spirit of resignation, or complain. But he rejoices because he sees his suffering as a means of advancing the gospel and encouraging other Christians to share his boldness (Philippians 1:14). **God did not give us a spirit of timidity but of power, of love and of self-discipline** (2 Timothy 1:7). He was not concerned to be popular but to preach the whole truth and be a faithful steward of what was entrusted to him.

Are you committed to this message? Are you sure it is the truth of God, concerned for the progress of the gospel, does it have an important place in your prayers, giving and witnessing, would you suffer anything rather than be unfaithful?

Why is this important to the angels?

Then Paul speaks of a world of which we know very little, but which is intensely interested in us and in what happens to us. Although the Gospel of the mystery of God's purposes in Christ is addressed to men and women on earth, it is observed by principalities and powers in heavenly places, or rulers and authorities in heavenly realms, i.e. angels.

Angels do not know everything, but they see the gospel being preached, they see the way God has dealt with problem of sin – by taking it on Himself in Christ. They see people responding to the gospel, and the way it brings together old enemies, and reconciles them. See the different ways people find Christ, and the way they are transformed. The way God sustains and keeps them in trials and brings them safely to glory. They see and learn things about God they never knew before. They learn about Him through the Gospel and the way the church grows and expands. They discover the manifold wisdom of God. God's power and wisdom seen in the church. It is like a

beautiful tapestry with people from different backgrounds and many coloured experiences. The angels are fascinated by it all. Peter says the angels desire to look into these things (1 Peter 1:12). παρακλυσσῶν stoop down to have a look at it. They are curious, they have never seen anything like it.

So God is educating the angels and instructing them through the gospel and through the building of the church.

*“In vain the firstborn seraph tries
To sound the depth of love divine.
Tis mercy all! Let earth adore,
Let angel minds enquire no more.”*

God's founding of the Christian church and growth and development is most astonishing phenomenon in whole of history. It is what history is all about. There are various theories about whether there is any pattern or meaning in history. According to Professor Arnold Toynbee history is a series of cycles – the rise and fall of nations going round and round in circles. H.A.L.Fisher concluded after a lifetime of studying history that there is no purpose in history at all. Humanists of the late Victorian and Edwardian period, up till 1914, the golden era of progress in scientific and cultural advance, thought they were too clever to see the need for Jesus as the Son of God and His miracles. It was enough to just obey His ethical teaching. Then there is Henry Ford's famous quote in the 1919 Chicago Tribune, “History is bunk”. And the claim by G.W.F.Hegel that “History teaches us that history teaches us nothing.”

But according to the Bible, history is under the control of God. God is at work, disclosing the plans He drew up in eternity. The coming of the Son of God in flesh was the greatest thing that happened in history. The preaching of the gospel and the fact and growth of the Christian church were all in His plan. God's preparing way and setting stage for second coming. Within story of mankind is the story of the people of God, found in many nations, to whom God has said “I will be their God and they will be my people.”

Why is this important to us?

This mystery, this message, the Gospel centred in the Lord Jesus Christ and building God's church in the world, preparing people for eternity, is also of enormous importance to us. Too often as evangelical Christians we begin, and rightly so, with personal relationship to Christ. Always begin there, but do not end there.

If we belong to Christ we belong to His people. So we should be concerned as much with the people of God as with Gospel (mentioned earlier). God's concern is not only to redeem us to Himself but to reconcile us to one another and bring us into His family. Gospel is not only good news about new life but of a new society, saved by His grace.

If the church is central to God's purposes and if history from God's angle centres in the church, its building and growth, it ought to be central in our lives. We cannot treat lightly what God treats very seriously. This unique phenomenon is God's most

glorious work, and it puts enormous dignity on the church. We cannot push to the circumference what God has put in the centre.

Easy to say all that and express pious empty sentiments about the church. The test is in the practical application, but is possible in local expression of the people of God. Dr Alexander Maclaren on Ephesians 5:25, **Christ loved the church and gave himself for it**, said (i) If Christ loved the church, we must love what He loved, (ii) we cannot love the church without loving real existing churches, (iii) we cannot love existing churches without loving one particular church, (iv) we cannot love one particular church without loving its people, work, services, and good name.

If we treat the church as seriously as God does, we shall treat seriously our commitment to one particular local church. If committed to it, we shall belong to it, love its people, make it our spiritual home, be devoted to its services, engaged in its work, concerned that its worship is meaningful, its fellowship is real and caring, its outreach is compassionate, we shall sacrifice, give, serve in most wholehearted and dedicated ways. Cannot treat it in critical and detached way.

Conclusion

The “mystery” is God’s plan of redemption in Christ. Carried out and fulfilled in and through His Son. Leads to building of church in the world. Consummation at the second coming.

It was important to Paul, for he was totally committed to it and prepared to suffer for it. It was important to the angels for they were fascinated by God’s power and wisdom, displayed in the church. And it is important to us and should have most practical consequences.