

Ephesians 3:1-13

The church rooted in Christ exudes humility and mission.

Have I ever told you that I got a B in preaching class?! Close to my lowest seminary grade... related mostly to a short sermon I preached for the class on Romans 9. The review of the preach (where fellow students were kind and encouraging, until the professor let loose!), saying that I put too much weight on Paul's example, how he was responding to the truth and the situation of his kin. I made it mandatory for my hearers to share Paul's conviction and willingness to be cursed to save them.

It was a sermon heavy on guilt and not seasoned with grace. Since then, some 14 years later, I can be gun-shy with narrative examples of response to the gospel.

This week that episode came to mind as I pondered the way I have been discipled by Paul. We are discipled by what we read - and through Paul I have been taught truth and how to respond to it. And while I usually see more of a resemblance in myself to Peter, occasionally stumbling following Jesus, it is Paul whose words and life have been used by the Spirit in such a transformative way in me.

As I have aged, and preached a lot more, I might push back to that early rebuke. After all, this is what Paul says:

1 Corinthians 10:31–33, 11:1 “So, whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God. [32] Give no offense to Jews or to Greeks or to the church of God, [33] just as I try to please everyone in everything I do, not seeking my own advantage, but that of many, that they may be saved. [1] Be imitators of me, as I am of Christ.” (ESV)

The pursuit of Christlikeness travels this way.

So this is how I want to approach our text - catch an example of Paul and hopefully resolve to respond in similar fashion.

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These verses, that follow after the explosively good news of salvation by grace, a new humanity in union with Christ, these are what scholars call a digression.

Paul seemingly wants to pray again for the church, which he will begin in verse 14 (which also starts “for this reason...”). But here, like a distracted kid, he revisits his infatuation.

He continues to exult, or revel in the gospel he has recounted, and by doing so he places it appropriately in the map of redemptive history and exemplifies an appropriate response to it.

Here we are reminded of his circumstances; likely jailed in Rome, for preaching how Jews and Gentiles are made one in Christ.

Evenso, he is anchored in the mystery of Christ and it produces gospel humility and gospel mission. Two things the church gets to be about as well.

1) The mystery of Christ generates gospel humility.

Mystery - everything Paul has just written about, the profound grace of God toward those dead in sin - life, family, eternity. Paul calls all of it the mystery of Christ. Revealed to him in an encounter with Jesus, made known to us as readers through his words and those of the apostles and prophets in the church.

Mystery is a tricky word, as briefly mentioned last week. We hear it and think of Sherlock solving a crime, or something beyond understanding. And there are things of mystery we leave as such (why God chooses who he does).

But when Paul uses the word, he means that which has now been made known. It was kept from previous generations but has now been exposed.

Paul’s words in Colossians 1:26 give us the idea: “the mystery hidden for ages and generations but now revealed to his saints.” It is something previously undreamed of that is now disclosed to believers—an open secret.” Hughes

This mystery was part of God’s eternal plan and consists of God creating a new people of both Jew and Gentile through the work of Christ. God is sovereignly fulfilling his plan of redemption as intended from the beginning of time.

Ephesians 3:6 “This mystery is that the Gentiles are fellow heirs, members of the same body, and partakers of the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel.” (ESV)

Mystery of the gospel - how redemptive history plays out. Building blocks of Old Testament encounter all pointing to Christ, now experienced, ignited by his life, death, and resurrection. The gospel that you were brought near by the blood of Christ, remade in him together Jews and Gentiles as one new man.

“together . . . together . . . together. Repetition of this word emphasizes the unique aspect of the mystery that was not previously known: Gentiles mutually and equally share in God’s blessings with Jews in the church. Although the OT declared God’s intention to bless Gentiles (Gen 12:3), the manner and extent to which God would accomplish his saving purposes by incorporating both Jews and Gentiles on equal footing into one body in Christ was not made known until the NT era.”

And we have gone on about the amazingness of this... and we will. But notice what it generates in Paul.

Here is the Pharisee of Pharisees (scholar, influencer), brilliant, he has had the personal revelation of Christ on the road of Damascus, he has been caught up in visions... yet he knows his frame (his history) and assumes a posture of humility.

He even makes up a new word, “leaster.”

Ephesians 3:7–8 “Of this gospel I was made a minister according to the gift of God’s grace, which was given me by the working of his power. [8] To me, though I am the very least of all the saints, this grace was given, to preach to the Gentiles the unsearchable riches of Christ,” (ESV)

Small Paul or the least of the least, less than the least.

I see this as true, gospel humility. Paul is acutely aware of his unworthiness (cf. 1 Cor 15:9; 1 Tim 1:15) since he persecuted Christ and the church (Acts 9:4; Phil 3:6). Nevertheless, he is amazed that God in his abundant grace would use someone such as him.

He claims an identity as a prisoner of Christ, he knows who controls his circumstance, and he has found that in everything, the grace of Christ is sufficient.

Now Paul has matured over his ministry, but by the time the church receives this letter he is humbled by the grace he is given, the ministry he is called to and that God would claim him.

This should be what the church exudes in light of the mystery of Christ as well! It's why I always talk about smelling like Jesus. There should be something about us that absent arrogance, comparison, self-righteousness, because we have met Jesus and know this mystery of being saved by grace and made new together.

Even granted confidence and boldness, humility prevails.

Paul asks that they not lose heart due to his chains but be emboldened to ministry.

Which is where the mystery of Christ leads us.

2. The Mystery of Christ fuels gospel mission.

Paul has been made a minister, he is given a special stewardship of this mystery. You might not have the same gift but you do share the purpose of his ministry.

Ephesians 3:8–10 “To me, though I am the very least of all the saints, this grace was given, to preach to the Gentiles the unsearchable riches of Christ, [9] and to bring to light for everyone what is the plan of the mystery hidden for ages in God, who created all things, [10] so that through the church the manifold wisdom of God might now be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly places.” (ESV)

Rooted in the unsearchable riches of Christ... The word translated “unsearchable” could also be rendered “inscrutable” or “incomprehensible” and refers to something “impossible to understand on the basis of careful examination or investigation”¹ (cf. Rom. 11:33). That which is unsearchable is the boundless wealth that belongs to Christ. Wealth that he gives us.

This is seeing the gospel as a diamond with endless facets to ponder and celebrate. Where the church is anchored.

But in hearing this preached, it is through the church that the mystery is made known now.

The church can be so many things. It can be seen as a club, even the best of community, it can be used as an educational institution, it can be viewed as a place of networking, a place of training and resourcing.

But above all of that, in highlighting the peace of Christ that creates a new humanity, we make known to the spiritual realm the wisdom of God.

Kind of crazy to think about. We are a spiritual people, we know there are angels and demons, “rulers and authorities in the heavenly places.” But do we often see our ongoing ministry as preaching to them?

John Stott says, “It is through the old creation (the universe) that God reveals his glory to humans; it is through the new creation (the church) that he reveals his wisdom to angels.”

The mystery of Christ, hidden even from spiritual beings, is made known through the mission of the church.

1 Peter 1:10–12 “Concerning this salvation, the prophets who prophesied about the grace that was to be yours searched and inquired carefully, [11] inquiring what person or time the Spirit of Christ in them was indicating when he predicted the sufferings of Christ and the subsequent glories. [12] It was revealed to them that they were serving not themselves but you, in the things that have now been announced to you through those who preached the good news to you by the Holy Spirit sent from heaven, things into which angels long to look. (ESV)

They watch as redemption unfolds and God’s glory goes forth. Demons tremble. Angels rejoice.

10 Given God’s incredible work of reconciling two hostile groups into one organic body, the church is the perfect means to display God’s wisdom. Insofar as the

church exists as a spiritually united multiethnic community, it accomplishes this task.

“The church is central to God’s working in history. The gospel is good news for a new society and new life. Paul described the church as a divine agent and as a divine fellowship with a divine mandate.” CSB

For our neighbors and for those in the skies - to the glory of God.

Rooted in Christ, in whom we have boldness and access with confidence through our faith in him - we live, as a new humanity - for the cosmos to see.

Not merely made comfortable but emboldened to make the mystery known. The mystery of Christ that fuels mission, making Jesus known, serving the unseen in our communities, bringing his peace where he has put us.

What might the Spirit spark in you - what grace will you be given to highlight the unsearchable riches of Jesus, and make known the manifold wisdom of God?

Like Paul, and millions more, humbly we follow Jesus, empowered by his Spirit for the mission of reconciliation, rescue, and renewal. Chains or not... The mystery of the gospel (vv. 2–6), the ministry of the gospel (vv. 7–9), and the manifold wisdom of the gospel (vv. 10–12) makes “counting the cost” an easy calculation.

The church is not just for itself, but for the good of others and the glory of God.

Timely for us, the church is not defined by space but by a people partaking in the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel.

May we be marked by it. May the world and spiritual beings see the wisdom of God in us.

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We get there knowing the mystery...

Ephesians 1:3–4 “Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places, [4] even as he chose us in him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and blameless before him. In love (ESV)

Ephesians 1:11–12 “In him we have obtained an inheritance, having been predestined according to the purpose of him who works all things according to the counsel of his will, [12] so that we who were the first to hope in Christ might be to the praise of his glory. (ESV)

Ephesians 2:8–10 “For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, [9] not a result of works, so that no one may boast. [10] For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them. (ESV)

Ephesians 2:19–22 “So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God, [20] built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus himself being the cornerstone, [21] in whom the whole structure, being joined together, grows into a holy temple in the Lord. [22] In him you also are being built together into a dwelling place for God by the Spirit. (ESV)

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Exult in the mystery (feel or show triumphant elation or jubilation.) - Jesus is for you. In him you are rescued from sin and death, you are remade in his likeness, into family, for the remaking of the world. Savor this!

Exude the mystery (display (an emotion or quality) strongly and openly.) - to the world, that they both spiritual and natural would wonder and God would be glorified. Let it fuel the mission of the church to preach the unsearchable riches of Jesus in word and deed.

This is Paul imitating Christ - this is the church empowered to live up to her call.

May it be so in us.