

CHURCH OF THE REDEEMER

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THE MYSTERY OF THE CHURCH

When Paul wrote this letter, he was in a Roman prison. He may have been a prisoner in his own rented house (cf. Acts 28:30), or he may have been in some cell. Whatever the case, he was chained and unable to go his own way. We all probably at one time or another have said to ourselves, "If someone would have told me 5 or 6 years ago that I would be doing this, I would have told them they're crazy." Think about what would have happened if someone with prophetic insight would have told Saul of Tarsus, "Saul, one of these days you are going to find yourself in a Roman prison, and all because you were preaching that Jesus of Nazareth was the promised Messiah who made atonement for sinners by being crucified and was buried and resurrected and exalted to the right hand of God the Father," he probably would have tried to kill him! Paul, the Jewish zealot, the strict Pharisee IS in prison because of his preaching to Gentiles regarding the despised and crucified Messiah, Jesus of Nazareth.

REVIEW: Paul's theme in the preceding section of the Epistle (2:11-22) dealt with the unity of the body of Christ made up of Jew and Gentile. 3:1 begins with the words FOR THIS REASON (TOUTOU CHARIN emphatic position, elsewhere only 3:14 and Titus 1:5). It introduces something very special. It suggests a strong personal feeling on the part of the Apostle.

I. THE MESSENGER DESCRIBED (vv. 1-2)

Up to now the Apostle has said very little about himself (cf. 1:15). There are a number of reasons for this. First, as we have already stated, this letter was encyclical. Some of those who received the epistle had never met Paul. The epistle is therefore not, strictly speaking, a personal one (like I and II Corinthians). It is a doctrinal exposition, much like Romans but dealing with a different theme. Second, he is anxious for his readers to understand the true nature of his present situation because it could be (and was) misunderstood.

A. PAUL THE PRISONER – The Apostle never refers to himself as "the prisoner of Rome" or the like. He is THE PRISONER OF CHRIST JESUS (comp. Philemon vv. 1:9 and II Timothy 1:8). By this Paul is NOT saying he is a captive of Christ in the sense that any Christian is, but he is expressly declaring that he is a prisoner FOR CHRIST and has been placed in a Roman prison BY Jesus Christ. He is not there by accident (cf. Acts 9:15-16). "He was a prisoner, but not for crime or through man's design: he was the Lord's prisoner, prisoner by His will and at the same time prisoner for His work: Christ's cause kept him in bonds."¹

1. THE PURPOSE: Why is Paul in a Roman dungeon? FOR THE SAKE OF YOU GENTILES (*HUPER*-preposition stressing the idea of replacement or substitution, lit. "in the place of" or "on behalf of"). The expression is emphatic in the Greek text. The reason for his imprisonment was his preaching, specifically as it related to Gentiles (cf. Acts 22:1-22).

B. PAUL THE STEWARD – The reason for Paul's imprisonment is directly related to his preaching. That's the obvious reason. But why did Paul preach? It had to do with his special mission. Paul says 'SURELY' (*EI GE*, "if indeed." The particles are used to express

assurance. Compare II Cor. 5:3 for parallel use). YOU HAVE HEARD ABOUT THE ADMINISTRATION (*OIKONOMIAN*, lit. stewardship. The term was used of the administrative responsibility given to a servant over a household. The same word is used in 1:9; 3:9; and Col 1:25) OF GOD'S GRACE THAT WAS GIVEN (*DOTHEISES*; aorist passive) ME.

1. **THE REASON:** What was the purpose of Paul's stewardship? It was FOR YOU (*EIS HUMAS*, lit. for your benefit). Paul was the Apostle to the Gentiles (cf. Gal. 2:7-9; Rom 15:15ff.), and for this he was accountable (I Cor. 9:16-17). The one thing a steward is required to be is faithful (I Cor 4:2), and the Apostle was that; "Paul the faithful" regardless of the cost – and it did cost him. Unlike so many today, Paul did not view the ministry as a means of lining his pockets. Even in Paul's day this occurred (cf. I Tim. 6:3-10). The point Paul is making relates to what has been said in 2:11-22. His imprisonment is due to his stewardship of the Gospel to the Gentiles (cf. Acts 26:16-18). His chains declared his faithfulness and victory. The chains were therefore for the Gentiles' glory (cf. 3:13). Paul is not having a pity party; on the contrary, he is expressing gratitude. His imprisonment is his badge of success!

II. THE MESSAGE REVEALED (vv. 3-5)

Paul did not invent his Gospel, neither was he taught it (cf. Gal. 1:11, 12). THAT BY (*KATA*, used here in the adverbial sense "by way of" and expresses the mode of the making known) REVELATION (*APOKALUPSIN*, an unveiling, revealing). This was special apostolic revelation. This was given to him. "A special providence had prepared him and a special call had claimed him, to be the depository of a special revelation."² God communicated direct and special revelation to Paul (cf. Acts 16:9; 22:1; 26:17, 18). This is NOT being done today, despite the many claims

- A. **ITS CONTENT:** THE MYSTERY ...AS I HAVE ALREADY WRITTEN BRIEFLY – Paul is referring directly to 2:10ff, but this in turn indirectly refers to everything he has written thus far: God's election, redemption and sealing by the Holy Spirit in Christ, of the Church His Body, composed of Jew and Gentile.
- B. **ITS NEWNESS:** This truth was unknown IN OTHER GENERATIONS, even Old Testament prophets. It was hidden not only to the Gentile, but to the Jew. IT HAS NOW BEEN REVEALED BY THE SPIRIT: the Holy Spirit, whose work it is to reveal in this special sense (cf. John 16:13; II Peter 1:21).
- C. **ITS RECIPIENTS:** GOD'S HOLY APOSTLES AND PROPHETS. Paul is not here referring to personal holiness. It is God's holy purpose, vessels and design that is stressed. If any text could be used to underscore not only the perfection of God's revelation but the exclusive agents of that revelation, it's this one. The various miracles and signs that accompanied the Apostles were primarily designed to confirm their new revelation. "Miracles do not appear on the page of Scripture vagrantly, here, there, and elsewhere indifferently without assignable reason. They belong to revelation periods, and appear only when God is speaking to His people through accredited messengers...It is unreasonable to ask for miracles, says John Calvin—or to find them—where there is no new gospel."³ People who run around today claiming that God speaks directly to them and reveals to them some sort of new revelation are extremely dangerous. They are not to be trusted. Especially when what they claim God revealed to them goes contrary to what God revealed to his "holy apostles and prophets."

III. THE MYSTERY EXPLAINED (v.6)

We have learned from 1:9 that the word MYSTERY (*MUSTERION*) refers to something once hidden, or secret but now revealed by special revelation, via the apostles and prophets of the New Testament.

What does it refer to here? *EINAI* (infinitive, used to explain the content of the revelation) begins v. 6. This is nicely translated "to be specific" in the NASB. THE GENTILES ARE (not "shall be")

HEIRS TOGETHER WITH (*SUNKLERONOMA*, lit. fellow heir) AND MEMBER OF THE BODY (*SUSSOMA*, lit. belonging to the same body) AND SHARERS TOGETHER (*SUMMETOCHA*, lit. fellow-partaker, joint-possessor). You will note how Paul used three different words all prefaced with the preposition *SUN* (with, together with). He is stressing the equality or “sameness” of the Gentiles WITH the Jews. IN THE PROMISE IN CHRIST JESUS. Both partook of the same Holy Spirit (cf. Acts 10:17) and His baptizing work (I Cor. 12:13). NOTE: Paul does NOT say Gentiles become Israel, nor does he say Israel passes off the scene. Gentiles are fellow heirs, fellow members and fellow partakers with Jews in Christ and THE PROMISE (cf. 1:12, 13; 2:12) realized in the Gospel of Jesus Christ Jew and Gentile make up the Church, the Body of Christ. This was completely unknown before, as Paul expressly declares.

CONCLUSION: Last week I came across a post by Tim Challies where he cited a quote by Richard Ganz that really jumped out to me. He is dealing with the frustration we often feel when we read the gospels. We read of Jesus’ disciples and see how time after time they just completely failed to understand who Jesus was and what he was up to. Ganz offers a biblical perspective: we look back at the disciples, and we wonder, “What in the world was wrong with them? How could they not get it?” The reality is quite the opposite. We should ask instead, “How could they get it?” It is impossible. It is beyond comprehension. The Old Covenant sacrifices, as powerful a pointer as they were, had a limited purpose. Their purpose was simply to show us how even the most rational and beautiful picture of grace – a blood sacrifice for sin - falls flat in front of what Jesus actually did. Jesus trained men, who, because of their background, should have been ready for the great blood sacrifice of Jesus on the cross. They weren’t. They were still utterly incapable of “getting it” just from the facts. This is understandable. The ultimate fact is that it is absolutely impossible to come to an understanding of God’s grace just from an assessment of the facts. There is nothing in human experience alone that can awaken a person to the full reality of God’s grace. What Jesus did for us, the grace that His life and death is for us, is eternally impossible to fully comprehend. The fact that people like us will live with God FOREVER is purely His gracious gift to us. Sadly, even though we know so much about grace, we continue to make obeying rules the high watermark of our lives, rather than grace. The disciples did not catch on because they could not catch on. Even for these men, who walked and talked with Jesus, it took a supernatural awakening for them to see who Jesus was and to turn to him as Lord. In that way, their path was not a whole lot different from our own.⁴ People often say, “time changes you.” That depends on what happens during that time. “Time” did not change Saul of Tarsus into Paul, the Apostle to the Gentiles, Grace did. He who once dragged Jewish Christians off to prison is now a prisoner on behalf of Gentile Christians. He who once “breathed out threats and murder” against the body of Christ, now is among the “holy apostles and prophets”. And this is all because of Grace: The Apostle to the Gentiles, the Apostle of Jesus Christ, Paul the Prisoner, Paul the miracle of Grace.

ENDNOTES

¹ B.F. Westcott, *Commentary on St. Paul’s Epistle to the Ephesians* (rpt. Eerdmans, 1957), p. 103

² J.A. Robinson, *Commentary on Ephesians: Exposition of the Greek Text* (rep. Kregel, 1979), p. 76

³ As cited by B.B. Warfield, *Miracles: Yesterday and Today, True and False* (rpt. Eerdmans, 1953), p. 27

⁴ Published on *Challies Dot Com* (<http://www.challies.com>)