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Series: The Church
Number: 17
Text: Ephesians 3:7-13
Date: September 25, 2011 (A.M.)

THE MINISTER AND THE MYSTERY

When someone says, “Don’t give me doctrine, I just want to follow Jesus”, what they are really saying is “give me law, not gospel. Give me more imperatives and less indicatives. I just want something practical.” But how is this any different than Mormons or theological liberals? Fact is, we need a Savior, not just a moral example. You could not have believed the gospel of Jesus Christ without knowing its contents. You did not just follow a generic Jesus. To be saved you understood that you had no self-righteousness of your own and you trusted in Christ’s finished work...which included His living the life you should have lived and dying the death you deserved. This is doctrine. The idea of simply “following Jesus” is requiring more demands of the law because you are looking for Jesus to tell you something you can do. But you need the gospel, not merely law, to be saved or to grow in grace. Indeed following Jesus springs out of a renewed heart. As Christians we only follow Jesus when we know who we are following and as such we need to preach the gospel to ourselves daily. The Spirit first brings an elect soul face to face with God’s holy Law, for “by the law is the knowledge of sin” (Rom 3:20). It condemns and curses him because it demands perfect obedience in thought, word, and deed. Next, the Spirit brings before the soul the precious Gospel where the law’s demands are perfectly met by Jesus Christ. The Spirit so works in his heart that He appears to him to be the most glorious object in the world; and so rests entirely upon His finished work. No one is suggesting that we have right doctrine but do not follow Jesus, but the imperatives (Commands) always spring from indicatives (what Jesus has done). Look at Ephesians for example. The first 3 chapters are pure doctrine...-“this is what Jesus has done for you”. Chapter four (4) then says THEREFORE, “live like this”. But the opposite is not true Biblically...right doctrine does NOT flow out of right living. To those who squirm at the word “doctrine” it simply means “teaching” – the Bible is full of teaching from start to finish. It does not matter if your church never used the word. Your eyes were opened and you believed because the Holy Spirit gave you understanding of the gospel and the teaching or doctrine in the Bible that Jesus is not just a moral example, but a Savior. You could not have been saved unless you FIRST understood the doctrine about these teachings about what Jesus did for you. You could not have been saved simply by saying “I am going to obey Jesus”...that is moralism – and no one is saved by obeying the moral commands of Jesus. They will damn you if you trust in them. But anticipating your criticisms, let me also declare that a simple reciting of doctrine without a changed heart has no value. Having pride in how good your doctrine is would mean that they have not yet grasped the most basic doctrine that we are saved by grace ALONE. Such a tragic misapplication of the doctrine we have learned denies Christ because it is trusting in something else (how good ones doctrine is). But again, the opposite is most often true in this day and age...that many people will say, “I don’t want doctrine at all, I just want to follow Jesus.” This is to want only instruction for practical living by giving them law...and to shun the teaching of the gospel altogether. This is the root of all cults and heresy. Most of the people who say “I don’t want doctrine” are usually the same people would say in the same breath “just give me something practical from the Bible” – and what they mean by this is that they want instructions about WHAT TO DO...rather than hear about what God has done for them in Christ. The phrase ‘Jesus follower’ places the focus on my following and the moral imperatives of Jesus. “Theological Liberals” and Mormons are characterized by their sermons on moral instruction – not the priority of Jesus as God the Savior. While people in the above cults all say they want to follow the Bible, but look closely

because they only want the LAW part of the Bible because that is practical for me. They don't want to hear about the gospel part of it because it is doctrinal, and more importantly, it strips us of all hope in ourselves and places our hope in Another.¹ The Apostle Paul had an overwhelming zeal for the Gospel of Jesus Christ. He was consumed with it; everything else paled into insignificance when compared to this one thing (cf. Phil. 3:7-10). Paul forsook personal comfort, and even personal safety, for the sake of the Gospel. He would 'gladly spend and be spent' (II Cor. 12:15). He stands in stark contrast to many "ministers" on the scene today. Paul aimed for the glory of God; many today seek their own glory. Paul preached the Gospel without charge; many today have a price tag attached to everything in their "ministry". Paul suffered according to the will of God; many today declare that it is NEVER the will of God to suffer. Eph. 3:7-13 provides us with a penetrating insight into the Apostle and his message.

REVIEW: Paul has been describing the nature of the mystery concerning the Church, the Body of Christ. In so doing he has injected some information about himself, since at this time he was in prison. He is anxious for his readers to understand not only his message, but his ministry.

I. THE MINISTER OF THE MYSTERY (vv. 7, 8a)

Paul refers to himself as a "servant" (*DIAKONOS*, from which "deacon" comes, an attendant, one who serves). How did Paul become a servant of the Gospel of Jesus Christ?

- A. HIS COMMISSION: It was the result of the "free gift" (*DOREAN* – at no charge or cost; without reason or cause, cf. Rom. 3:24; Jn. 15:25) of God's grace given (*DOTHEISES* – aorist passive, comp. v. 2) me." This began it, and God continued it, "through the working of his power" *ENERGEIAN TES DUNAMEOS* – comp. v. 2 and 1:19). "The change in Paul when God made him an Apostle of Christ to the Gentiles was so great that he saw in it nothing less than the result of the Divine omnipotence."²
- B. HIS ATTITUDE: How did all this affect Paul? "...to me" is emphatic in the Greek text. It stands first in the sentence. "I am less than the least *ELACHISTOTEROI*, lit. "the smallest" or "least". The form was used to designate the deepest self-abasement) of all God's people", and yet "this grace was given to me" (cf. I Cor. 15:9 and I Tim. 1:15). Paul glories in his calling (cf. II Cor. 11:5); NOT in himself. "Never did a man more stoutly press his claims: Never was a man more conscious of personal unworthiness."³

II. THE MESSAGE OF THE MYSTERY (vv. 8b-9)

Paul was commissioned for a purpose. The verb "preach" (*EUANGELIZO*, to proclaim, declare, preach) takes up again "the gospel" referred to in v. 6.

- A. ITS SCOPE: "To the gentiles...and...to everyone." The grace of God included Saul of Tarsus, and it includes the Gentiles – who will hear it proclaimed at first by a "converted" Jewish Pharisee! It is proclaimed to all, and the apostle wants men to know the fullness of this message.
- B. ITS CONTENTS: "The unsearchable (*ANEXICHNIASTOS*, lit. "untrackable", cf. Rom. 11:33) riches of Christ" (comp. Col. 1:27; 2:2). "The unsearchable riches of Christ, are the fullness of the Godhead, the plenitude of all divine glories and perfections which dwell in him; the fullness of grace to pardon, to sanctify and save; everything in short which renders him the satisfying portion of the soul."⁴
- C. ITS PLAN: There is a goal in view. The message is proclaimed in order to accomplish something, "to make plain" (*PHOTISAI*, lit. "to enlighten", "to give light", "to illuminate", "cause to see", cf. 1:18; Col. 1:26 and II Cor 4:4). What are men to see? "The mystery", hidden but now revealed by God (cf. v. 5). NOTE: God is declared to be Creator because ALL things have their origin with Him. HE plans and purposes and accomplishes and reveals; nothing is impossible with God.

III. THE MAJESTY OF THE MYSTER (vv. 10-11)

Creation declares God's power and sovereignty, and the message of Christ crucified is the power of God unto salvation; but it also serves to declare the justice and righteousness of God (cf. Rom. 3:21-

26).

- A. ITS SOURCE: The message has its source solely in God Himself. It deals with “the manifold (*POLUPOIKILOS*, lit. much variegated with many colors) wisdom of God” (cf. Rom. 11:33-36).
- B. ITS DESIGN: God’s purpose is an eternal one; its outworking in history is not left to chance. Furthermore, it is manifested to angelic creatures as well – “rulers and authorities in the heavenly realms”, an expression that has in view primarily the fallen angels (comp. 6:11). Creation manifests the Glory of God, and redemption manifests the Glory and Grace of the Creator. The Church is, as it were, God’s display of His power, glory, and grace, which He “accomplished (*EPOIESEN*, lit. brought to fulfillment) in Christ Jesus our Lord”. NOTE how the Savior is listed.

IV. THE MARVELS OF THEIR MYSTERY (vv. 11-13)

The “mystery” underscores the means of redemption as well as its nature and outcome. Therefore, the fruits, as it were, of redemption are brought out.

- A. THE MEANS: “in him and through faith in him” – there is no relationship with God apart from Christ.
- B. THE PRIVILEGE: “we may approach (*PROSAGOGEN* – to draw near, word used in Septuagint for priestly approach to God, cf. Heb. 10:22) God with freedom (*PARRESIA*, lit. to speak withal, cf. Heb. 4:16) and confidence (*PEPOITHESIS*, having been persuaded, cf. II Cor. 1:15).” The grounds for such action is to be found only in Jesus Christ; He is our access to the Father (cf. 2:18).
- C. THE ENCOURAGEMENT: Paul concludes by exhorting them to not be discouraged over his suffering for them. His imprisonment is not a sign of failure. Paul in effect points them to the logic of his gospel, not to a stoic resignation; on the contrary, this is the same man that wrote Rom. 8:28!

CONCLUSION: A commitment based on emotion or on the personality of the preacher will never endure the trials of life. “Faith” that is not anchored to the objective and historical facts is sure to give way in the storm. Furthermore, this “faith”, or, more precisely, the object of faith, must be apprehended and comprehended; and this is exactly the thing at which the Apostle aimed in his ministry – “get a grasp of these truths” was, in effect, Paul’s constant exhortation; but the exhortation always followed the doctrinal teaching. Paul’s ministry to the church was simple: Establish the saints in the knowledge of the truth; ground them in sound doctrine; this is how you prepare the saints for ministry; this is how believers are built up and rooted in Christ.

ENDNOTES

¹ http://www.reformationtheology.com/2011/09/dont_give_me_doctrine_i_just_w_1.php

² S.D.F. Salmond, *The Expositor’s Greek Testament* (rpt. Eerdmans, 1970) p. 304.

³ J.A. Robinson, *Commentary of Ephesians: An Exposition of the Greek Text* (rpt. Kregel, 1979) p. 165.

⁴ Charles Hodge, *Commentary on the Epistle to the Ephesians* (rpt. Revell, 1980) p. 169.