

Stewards of the Mysteries of God

By Joel C. Gerlach

“Let a man so account of us, as of the ministers of Christ, and stewards of the mysteries of God” (I Cor. 4:1 KJV). Those words of St. Paul provide the theme for the study we are about to make of the concept of the mysteries of God in Christ.

Mystery is an intriguing word. It is usually surrounded with an aura of mystique and fascination. It is suggestive of an intricate and involved plot too deep for ordinary mortals to fathom. To discover the truth behind the mystery usually requires access to inside information. Without an enlightened Sherlock to penetrate the mystery, ordinary Dr. Watsons like us would have to endure the frustration of remaining in the dark.

Mystery is also a word with a long history. In apostolic times it carried strong overtones of the contemporary mystery religions which challenged Christianity. Seers of the ancient mystery religions claimed to be in possession of life-giving, secret knowledge, knowledge that would explain the puzzles of the universe and unfold the future. Only when a person had undergone an elaborate ritual of initiation could he know the mysteries and be admitted to the secret society (a procedure similar to the practice of some lodge organizations today).

Some Bible scholars have attempted to probe the pagan idea of mystery in the mystery religions in an attempt to arrive at a clearer understanding of the use of the term in the New Testament. More recently scholars have shifted their attention to studies of Semitic parallels to arrive at a proper understanding of the term. But the meaning of the term in the Bible isn't dependent on the history of the term in non-biblical frames of reference. Its meaning, as we shall see, is clear enough from the biblical context in which it occurs.

Mystery has also managed to attract a high level of interest in the course of history. That's understandable. Human beings have always been involved in a restless search for the meaning and purpose of life. They are plagued and perplexed by the problems of evil and suffering in the world. They are frustrated by the limitations of their humanness. For these reasons they seek illumination. Some think the study of philosophy at a prestigious university will help them to discover the secrets of life. Some look to gurus on the lunatic fringe of religion, the Ron Hubbards, the Herbert Armstrongs or the Bhagwan Rajneeshes. Some look to the occult for illumination. Somewhere, someone has the secret.

Indeed, someone does have the secret. God does, and he has not kept the mystery of the ages a secret. He has revealed it to the world so that all may know it, and he has made us stewards of the mysteries he has revealed to the world in Christ. Our purpose in this paper is to review with you the mysteries of God together with the role we are to play as

I. Stewards of the Mysteries of God

The key word for our consideration is the word *μυστήριον*. The English word *mystery* is a transliteration of the Greek word. In ordinary usage the emphasis in the word is on a mystery *hidden* from all but the initiated. In the Bible the emphasis is on the *revelation* of a truth formerly hidden. Under the influence of the Holy Spirit, St. Paul uses this word as a weapon against its pagan exponents. The real mystery, as Paul sees it, was not devised by ancient mystics and passed down in time through a succession of wise men. Rather the mystery was conceived in the mind of God. It is so unique, so extraordinary, that it could never have been conceived in the mind of man. Then, in time and in Christ, the mysteries of God were communicated to us.

The word occurs 27 times in the New Testament (28 if you read *μυστήριον* instead of *μαρτύριον* in I Cor. 2:1). The only use of the word in the Gospels is in a response Jesus gave to a question his disciples put to him after he had related the parable of the Sower. “Why do you speak to the people in parables?” they wanted to know. Jesus replies, “The knowledge of the secrets (*μυστήρια*) of the kingdom of heaven has been given to you, but not to them” (Mt. 13:11; Mk. 4:11; Lk. 8:9-10). In addition to that one occurrence in the synoptics, the apostle John employs the word four times in the book of Revelation (1:20; 10:7; 17:5 & 7).

The remaining 20 occurrences are all found in the epistles of Paul (once in 2 Thessalonians; 5 times in 1 Corinthians; 2 times in Romans; 4 times in Colossians; 6 times in Ephesians, and 2 times in I Timothy). Our study of the mysteries of God will confine itself primarily to the letter to the Ephesians. It is in that letter that we are given our clearest and fullest insight into the meaning and the practical significance of the mysteries of God. In that letter Paul expounds 1) the mystery of God's will (1:9), 2) the mystery of our union with Christ (5:32) and 3) the mysteries of our sharing the Gospel (3:6).

The Term Defined

An explanation of the term is in order at the outset. It is variously translated. KJV, NIV, NASB and RSV all translate the phrase in Eph. 1:9 "the mystery of his will." The NEB renders it "God's hidden purpose" and the ABS's Good News gives it yet another twist, "God's secret plan."

It is not inappropriate to say that the thrust of Paul's letter to the Ephesians is to set forth the mystery of God's will. The entire letter unfolds God's secret plan or purpose for the universe, as that secret plan was revealed in Jesus Christ and is now being implemented and unfolded by the church. Paul projects for us a picture of the movement of all created things toward the goal of being brought together in one under one head, Christ. The vision is cosmic, all encompassing. Scene one begins with a statement about God's decision "before the creation of the world" (1:4); the action carries forward to the time when "the times will have reached their fulfillment" and it concludes at that moment when finally "*all things*" are subsumed or brought together (1:10b) under the lordship of our Lord.

We can better appreciate the profound nature of what Paul is telling us if we view it against the backdrop of the times in which we are living. If you'll pardon the colloquialism, the truth Paul presents is one of God finally getting his act together, achieving what he intended for this universe when he created it. That includes human beings getting their act together too. But that's not what we see when we look at things today. We see disunity and disharmony both in the secular and in the religious world. Our generation is desperate for a sense of community and for continuity and it grasps in any and all directions trying to find it. Isn't that a bit of grim irony? A thousand conflicting ideologies claiming to offer direction, meaning and fellowship vie for followers. They only compound the problem. But God has a plan for oneness to prevail, and we have the privilege of helping God bring it off. It is time to look at the content of that plan and the part we are called to play in it.

The Mystery of God's Salvation

In Paul's day the fundamental rupture of society was that which separated Jew from Gentile. It was God's intention to unite these two separate and antagonistic segments of ancient society (3:3-6). God has a plan for doing so. Paul calls it a *πρόθεσις* (1:11), i.e., a design, a blueprint. That design is being worked out in history. That makes history His story. A personal "Force" is at work in our world and in our lives. The world is not a huge machine careening like a driverless truck down the highway. This world is going somewhere and our Lord is in the driver's seat.

Without benefit of a copy of God's plan, it would be impossible to recognize a design in much of what is going on in our world. Much less would we conclude that the plan we see unfolding was conceived in the mind of God according to "his good pleasure" (1:9). Secular philosophies observe the same phenomena that we do and they conclude that everything seems to be moving toward nothing in particular. There's not too much to cheer about in such a view of life.

Ephesians 1:3-14

The letter to the Ephesians gives us a different view. It opens with an overture, a lyrical praise of God's grand design in the form of a doxology (Eph. 1:3-14). In the Greek text, all 11 verses of the overture comprise

but one sentence. The NIV breaks it up into 8 sentences to make it easier to assimilate. Paul invites us to observe the procession of the universe as it moves inexorably in the direction of the goal God has set for it. That goal, Paul says, is “to bring all things in heaven and on earth together under one head, even Christ.”

Nothing in all of Scripture quite matches this doxology. It leaves you with your mouth open in awe of God. Key phrases recur again and again: the will of God (5, 9, 11); to the praise of his glorious grace (6, 12, 14) and in Christ (3, 4, 6, 7, 9, 10, 11, 12, 13). It is trinitarian in structure. The Father receives praise as the author of the mystery (4-6), the Son serves as the agent who carries out God’s design (7-12), and the Holy Spirit is introduced as “a deposit guaranteeing our inheritance “until we all reach our final destiny (13-14). Each part concludes with the refrain “to the praise of his glory.”

Opening – Benediction

Paul begins with a benediction. That’s significant. Words of a blessing are not just the expression of a pious wish. When we speak, for example, the words of the Aaronic blessing at the conclusion of a worship service, God is active transmitting life and destiny. So here, Paul is saying that God has spoken the words which make the future certain and set it moving in the right direction. God is actively unfolding the mystery of his will in the lives of his people. He “has blessed us in the heavenly realms with every spiritual blessing in Christ.”

Paul’s reference to the heavenly realms reminds us again that what God has done and is doing in Christ has cosmic dimensions. It encompasses everything not only in the realm of this world, but in the realm of heaven as well. It also encompasses all of time stretching from eternity to eternity, starting with the choice God made “before the creation of the world” and reaching fulfillment when he has brought “all things in heaven and earth together under one head, even Christ.”

The Mystery of Our Adoption

God “predestined us to be adopted as sons.” Us, adopted, - the terminology Paul employs here brings to mind something God had said about Israel at the time of the Exodus. God directed Moses to tell Pharaoh, “This is what the Lord says: Israel is my firstborn son... ‘Let my son go, so he may worship me’.” (Ex. 4:22-23). Israel squandered away its privilege as God’s firstborn. Israel lost interest in worshiping God and in representing God to the world. So God provided another Son, his only begotten, to be the true Israel in place of the unfaithful first born, and to do what Israel failed to do. Having accomplished all that, God incorporated us into the true Israel. He adopted us as sons, revealed his mystery to us, and now through us makes his mystery known to the nations.

Here is God’s secret plan, step by step. The mystery began to unfold when God called Abram and promised that through his seed all families of the earth would be blessed (Gen. 12:2). God repeated his promise to Isaac (26:4), then to Jacob (28: 14; 35:11; 46:2). In each instance God makes it clear that he has taken the initiative. He elicits trust. He calls his servants and they respond in faith.

The mystery unfolded further at the time of the Exodus. God rescued Israel from Egypt in most dramatic fashion to deepen and to strengthen his people’s understanding of their covenant relationship with God. It was almost like drawing pictures for them. Then at Sinai he made another covenant with Israel, making them not only a specially privileged people but honoring them with a call to serve. He intended to use Israel to further his plan for the nations. He chose Israel, not because they were special, not because he had no interest in other nations, but precisely because he did have an interest in other nations. His plan called for Israel to help make that interest known. “You shall be My own possession *among* all the peoples and you shall be to Me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation” (Ex. 19:5-6 NASB), - not to serve themselves but to serve a world in need. That was the mission God intended for them.

Alas, Israel prized the privilege but forgot the plan. God’s people broke the covenant. They failed in their mission. Prophet after prophet pleaded with the people to remember the covenant and to be faithful. With breaking hearts the prophets warned the people of the dire consequences of their preoccupation with themselves, of proudly claiming to be the people of God but forgetting why. Finally God sent Jeremiah to

announce that the end had come, not because God had run out of patience but because Israel had become obdurate.

What now? God was disappointed but not thwarted. He proceeded to unfold the next step of his mystery. It was time for a new start, a new people, time for the establishment of a new covenant, time to send Israel into permanent exile except for the faithful few, time to destroy the temple and the holy city and all the other symbols which were causing the people of Israel to confuse the form with the substance of their religion.

Groundwork for God's new start included the exposure of all the false ideas of the priests and the people. God made it unmistakably clear that he was not confined to any holy city or to the Holy of Holies or to the ark or even to the temple itself. He was not bound irrevocably to any nation such as the Jews or to any specific political or social system anymore than he is bound to Milwaukee or to the WELS. The situation called for judgment. After all, and above all, God is a God of righteousness. Before there could be salvation there had to be judgment.

God's new start, like the call of Abraham and like the Exodus, was an act of pure grace. The pot the potter "was shaping from the clay was marred in his hands; so the potter formed it into another pot, shaping it as seemed best to him" (Jer. 18:4). The pot is new, the design is different, but the hand that shapes it is the same. Call it the hand of grace. The new covenant, like the covenant with Abraham, is still a covenant of grace. (cf. Jer. 31:31-33; Is. 53:12; 54:10; 55:3 et alii).

Enter the Messiah

The full meaning and importance of God's covenant promises becomes evident only when the Messiah comes. With the birth of Jesus the mystery of God becomes an open secret. His life, death and resurrection establish God's new covenant of grace. His blood ratifies it. "This cup is the new covenant in my blood," Jesus said.

So the righteousness which the Law was incapable of producing Jesus produced for us as God's obedient Servant. And the sins which the Law exposes Jesus atoned for with his sacrifice as God's suffering Servant. That is the grace which God "has freely given us in the One he loves" (1:6), or as KJV and NASB have it, "which he freely bestowed on us *in the Beloved*".

The True Israel

Paul here applies to Jesus a term used in the Old Testament for the people of Israel. Paul is underscoring what the writers of the New Testament so often suggest, viz. Jesus is the true Israel. He assumed the responsibility and the service to which Israel had been called but had failed to produce. Jesus is the true Servant of Jehovah. The history and the experience of Israel as God's servant are summed up in the work of Jesus. All the grace God bestowed on Israel finds its focus "in the Beloved" in whom God chose us from eternity.

Everything focuses, everything centers in Christ. Notice how Paul insures that no one misses this all-important truth. No less than five times in quick succession Paul employs the phrases "in Christ," "in him," and "in whom." The mystery of God's will was revealed in Christ. Jesus occupies the focal point of all history. The cross brings the new and the old together. In Christ God "brings all things together under one head." Jesus was anointed as Messiah for that very purpose, to effect unity where there is division, to transform scamps into saints, to make heirs out of rebels, to announce forgiveness to a world of transgressors, to put everything back together again the way God originally intended it to be.

That, in essence, is the mystery of God's will "which he purposed in Christ," and which was "to be put into effect when the times will have reached their fulfillment." God arranged all of history in such a way as to provide a moment called "the fullness of time." And he planned for something to happen at that moment that would have cosmic consequences, something that would give fullness (πλήρωμα)* and meaning to everything.

* If you prefer to understand πλήρωμα in a passive sense, then all ages funnel down toward the moment of the fullness of time and

That “something” is Jesus. Here, if you will, is the window of history through which we can peek to see and know what God has done, is doing and will be doing as he prepares the world for its final consummation. Jesus is our window on the world, the window that makes it possible for us to say, “God’s mystery is no mystery to us.”

Paul is reminding us that various times in history have their own special significance. Some times are of greater importance than others. Some times have redemptive significance, a *καιρός*, Scripture calls it. We think of the flood, the call of Abraham, the Exodus, the exile of Israel and the return from exile, and most especially the crucifixion and the resurrection. All these things are “brought together,” (NIV) or “summed up” (NASB) in the Christ-event right there in the center of history. All these things together with everything else get their meaning from the Christ-event. The cross and the empty grave throw a new light on everything.

MacBeth says, “Life is a tale that is told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, signifying nothing” (Act V, Scene 5). Jesus says, “That’s nonsense.” Life is part and parcel of God’s grand design. Like everything else in the universe your life is being brought together under one head - even Christ. Modern secular man sees life and history as open-ended in an open-ended universe and an open-ended society. In such a world it is impossible to know the meaning of life. He can ask why we are here and where we are going. But he can only speculate about the answers, and the best he can come up with is “who knows?”

Paul disagrees. He insists that the future is predictable if not in detail at least in broad outline. The future will continue to bring an unfolding of the mystery of God’s will. God is going to go right on doing what he’s always been doing ever since Adam fragmented God’s handiwork. He’s going to go right on bringing all things together again under our Lord Jesus Christ.

The New Israel

The death of Jesus, the true Israel, results in the birth of the new Israel, Christ’s church. Jesus announced that the Kingdom of God had come into the world. He called people to come into that kingdom, starting with his disciples. They formed the nucleus of a new Israel. All who, like his disciples, hear his voice and follow him become heirs of all the promises God gave to Israel. “Those who have faith are blessed along with faithful Abraham, the man of faith” (Gal. 3:9).

The ultimate mystery of God for Israel and for the world became an open secret in Christ. The Savior bore the judgment God handed down on the world’s sin. He opened the way of salvation for all. God declared all men forgiven in Christ. God declared all men righteous for Jesus’ sake (Kokomo notwithstanding). Thus, a new age began. A new ruler was enthroned. “Go,” he said, as he set in motion the mission to proclaim the message of the new Israel to all nations. “I am with you,” he promised. In the promise of his presence lies the power in and through the Holy Spirit to accomplish that mission. Jesus promises to make his way among men with life-giving power. He promises to conquer all resistance including “the gates of hell.” He promises to make his new Israel a living and powerful witness to his life, death and resurrection.

And so it came to pass. First there was Pentecost. Peter preached the fact of the new Israel. He insisted boldly that Jesus had been vindicated as Israel’s Messiah by his resurrection from the grave. God’s covenant had not been annulled. In Solomon’s Colonnade, after healing the lame man, Peter insisted that God’s covenant with his people was still in effect, still functioning, still bringing “times of refreshing,” still singling out and laying a claim on God’s chosen people. “You are heirs of the prophets and of the covenant God made with your fathers” (Acts 3:25).

It is true, of course, that God’s call was still being extended by the apostles primarily to “the lost sheep of Israel.” But not for long. The mystery of God included plans for incorporating people from all over the world into the new Israel. What began in Jerusalem and Judea was to spill over into Samaria and then spill out “to the ends of the earth” (Acts 1:8). God was in the process of grafting the wild olive branch into the true olive tree of Israel with the intent that that branch bear fruit in every nook and corner of the world. The cross marks the cross-

sroads of time where the church of God goes through a transition from an Israel bound together by blood relationship to Abraham to the people of God bound together by the Holy Spirit in the body of Christ.

Peter provides us with the most profound pronouncement of the truth that, in the New Testament age, the Christian community is the new Israel. His words are pregnant with allusions to Old Testament terms and metaphors. “You are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God....Once you were not a people, but now you are the people of God” (I Pt. 2:9-10). God calls and empowers the new Israel to become a light for the world to replace the old Israel, the light that failed.

God is saying to us today: “I brought you out of the faceless and nameless mass of humanity and made you something special, royal priests no less. In baptism I made you a holy nation to serve my purposes in the world. All the entitlements and privileges and honors I once gave to Israel I am now giving to you. I have brought you out of darkness into the light. If you appreciate that, then understand that your best worship is to believe all that I have done for you and to let your lives become a display case of my grace and goodness.”

Summation

So the mystery of God’s will has been revealed. God took action in Jesus Christ. Now people everywhere are being incorporated into a new reality, the living body of Christ in this world. As God’s people, we become participants in Christ’s own life and in his mission. By the grace of God we are what we are. He holds in his hand a “claim ticket” with our names on it. He expects to work out his “secret” plan in and through every believer. His ultimate goal is “to make plain to everyone the administration of this mystery, which for ages past was kept hidden in God, who created all things. His intent was that now, through the church, the manifold wisdom of God should be known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly realms, according to his eternal purpose which he accomplished in Christ Jesus our Lord” (Eph. 3:9-11).

Paul’s triple emphasis on the truth that as the chosen of God we are to live “to the praise of his glory” is a forceful reminder that we do not live in this world for ourselves, but for God and for *his* world. The church is not a place to escape from the world. It doesn’t isolate and insulate us from the world. It’s an agency to equip us to serve one another and the world. It’s an agency through which God transforms our lives so that he can use us in the unfolding of the mystery of his will for the world.

II. The Mystery of Our Union with Christ

Two facets of the mystery of God call for special emphasis and consideration. The first of the two is the mystery of our union with Christ. “This is a profound mystery - but I am talking about Christ and the church” (Eph. 5:32). Paul makes this observation in the context of his discourse on a Christian husband’s duties toward his wife. He had just said, “For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh.”

A Son did leave his Father; he was united with his Bride; and the two became one “flesh.” He in us and we in him; he the head, we the members; one body, Christ’s body.

The Body of Christ

Because the “body of Christ” is a familiar expression, we tend not to think of it as extraordinary. But the fact is that it has no parallel even in Scripture. It is peculiar to Paul. In ordinary usage we speak of a governing body, a student body, and even a church body. We may speak of a body of Christians. But Paul didn’t. He speaks of Christians as the body of Christ, and he calls this “a profound mystery.” In a mysterious way, the church is an extension in today’s world of the incarnate Christ. It speaks for him (He that hears you hears me); it does his work. (Whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did for me). It is the instrument with which he carries out his mission of gathering all things together under his headship. It is “the fullness of him who fills everything in every way” (1:23). I’m not sure I understand properly what that all

means. But, among other things, it has to mean that as the mystery of God's will is continuously unfolded, the church plays a vital part. It assists Jesus with the filling he is doing. Christ's body is involved together with him in his ongoing, redeeming (in the sense of reclaiming) work in this world.

When there were sick to be visited, Jesus visited them. When there were hungry people to be fed, he fed them. The poor, the halt, the maimed, the blind; the upper class, the middle class, and the lower class; lawyers and rich young rulers, pariahs and prostitutes, the Lazaruses and the Nicodemuses - all of them people with needs recognized or unrecognized. Jesus was a people person. So must the church be. The church is his body, Christ in the process of being reincarnated."

It is not always easy for us to remember that. It is easy to think of the church as something disincarnate. We tend sometimes, to think of the church as something to belong to or as something to go to. Paul didn't. He presents it to us as a functioning body, as people actively involved with people as people whose words and actions are patterned after Jesus' words and actions. In the body of Christ, Head and members are never separated from each other. They never act independently of one another. They function together in God-pleasing harmony and in exemplary coordination, doing what the Lord of the church directs them to do.

Where is God?

Scripture suggests yet another way to view this mystery of our union with Christ, one that should help to disabuse us of some of the inadequate perceptions we have of the church. After David had established himself upon the throne of Israel and built an imposing palace for himself, he felt uneasy about the fact that his own presence was associated with a palace while God's presence was associated with a least mere tent. Surely God deserved something better. At least so David thought. But God wasn't impressed with David's good intentions. Through the prophet Nathan, God told David, "Wherever I have moved with all the Israelites, did I ever say to any of their rulers whom I commanded to shepherd my people Israel, 'Why have you not built me a house of cedar?'" (2 Sam. 7:7)

Israel's heathen neighbors built temples for their gods. So Nathan told David that God would not be flattered if David did likewise. Instead, "The Lord declares to you (David) that the Lord himself will establish a house for you." It is clear from what follows that "the house of David" which God had in mind was something other than a magnificent temple. "I will raise up your offspring to succeed you He is the one who will build a house for my Name, and I will establish the throne of his kingdom forever." This prophecy found its typical fulfillment in the person of Solomon. But it found its real fulfillment in the person of Jesus. Gabriel made that clear to Mary when he told her that the Lord would give her Son the throne of his father David, and that Jesus would rule on that throne forever.

The temple David had in mind got built anyway, as you know, and then rebuilt and rebuilt once more by Herod. Standing in that temple one day Jesus said, "Destroy this temple, and I will raise it again in three days" (Jn. 2:19). The temple he was speaking about, John tells us, was his body, the body of Christ, the one resurrected from the grave.

Now it is significant that the apostles do not make a sharp distinction between the resurrected body of Christ and the holy Christian church, the communion of saints. St. Paul declares, "For we are the temple of the living God. As God has said, 'I will live with them and walk among them, and I will be their God, they will be my people'." (2 Cor. 6:16).

Nathan wanted David to understand something important about the "house of David". God does not dwell in temples made with hands. He dwells in and among his people. Paul wanted the Corinthians to understand that God dwells in and among his people in Christ. Thus the church in Corinth was both "the house of David" and "the temple of the living God."

So if we ask the question "Where is God?" the answer is God is at home among his people, permanently. He once visited Abraham's tent and had a meal with him, but he didn't stay. He visited Israel at the tabernacle at Gilgal and Gibeah, and later in the temple at Jerusalem, but he didn't make either of them the abiding place of his presence either. The abiding place of his presence is the body of Christ, the holy Christian

church. That is where, in fulfillment of his promise to David, he has established his throne forever.

“This is a profound mystery - but I am talking about Christ and the church.”

It is of practical significance for us that Paul says this in the context of the marriage relationship. The marriage relationship helps us to understand more fully the mystery of our union with Christ (just as our union with Christ helps us to appreciate more fully what the relationship of husbands and wives is meant to be).

Spouses in a Christian marriage patterned after the divine design are single-minded. They have one purpose and one goal. They unite their efforts. They merge their resources. They pool their talents. They cooperate. They do things together in harmony. The two are one, one with each other and one in Christ.

So it is also in the church. We are single-minded. “We have the mind of Christ” (I Cor. 2:16). We confess one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all. We have one purpose and goal. That is to further Christ’s mission in this world. We unite our efforts. We merge our resources. We pool our talents. We cooperate. We do things together in harmony. We are one in Christ and so also one with each other. Because individually we are one in Christ, collectively, we are one with each other as well. Because of that we “walk together.” In short, we are a synod.

Synod, whether we speak of a district synod or the entire synod, means exactly that: *walk* together, not sit together “at ease in Zion,” but walk. To walk suggests going somewhere, doing something. It’s an action word. As delegates to this district synod convention, you are here to decide under Christ where you are going and what ways and means you are going to take together to get there.

A district synod is a Platonic sort of thing. It doesn’t exist apart from you and your fellow Christians in the congregations you represent. The Lord of the church has made you all one, one in Christ, one in faith, one in the confession of that faith. Confessing that oneness in word and action is the church’s reason for being. It exists to undo the division which disrupted the unity and the harmony of the original creation. It exists to undo the confusion and the separation that resulted from man’s vain attempt at Babel to make a name for himself. It exists to demonstrate and to proclaim that “the dividing wall of hostility (2:14) has been destroyed in Christ, and that a reconciliation has been effected on behalf of all people without exception. It exists to serve the world as God’s instrument of healing. Our life together in the church is one of response to God who has liberated us for the task of serving other people.

That is what has brought you together here. You are here to plan a work program for your district, one that will involve every congregation of the district, one that will have an effect on the work program of each congregation, and, in fact, of each Christian. That work program will be one that calls for commitment, sacrifice and service. It will also be one that gives expression to your unity in the body of Christ. It will be one that helps the members of your congregation to be “little Christs” to the world.

When the planning and resolving you came here to do are done, then your unity will prompt you to join hands in seeing it through. Not every one is going to agree on every aspect of it. But when our resolutions further our reason for being, we suppress personal concerns for the common good. Unity of mind, purpose and action is a higher concern than any personal concerns. After all, we are the body of Christ in action.

In this way we make the mystery of our union with Christ an open secret, so open that what others see in us may under the Spirit’s influence lead them to glorify our Father in heaven. All in all, we want to demonstrate to all that the union between Christ and his Bride is a genuinely happy marriage.

III. The Mystery of Our Sharing the Gospel

One other facet of the mystery of God’s will calls for our special attention. God has not revealed the mystery of his will to us merely to provide us with an object of wonder and adoration in our worship services and in our private devotions. Nor was it his purpose in revealing his secrets to us to produce an elite corps of special people with inside information to be carefully guarded from others. Just the opposite is the case. Listen to what Paul says:

Surely you have heard about the administration of God’s grace that was given to me for you,

that is, the mystery made known to me by revelation, as I have already written briefly. In reading this, then, you will be able to understand my insight into the mystery of Christ, which was not made known to men in other generations as it has now been revealed by the Spirit to God's holy apostles and prophets. This mystery is that through the gospel the Gentiles are heirs together with Israel, members together of one body, and sharers together in the promise in Christ Jesus. (Eph. 3:2-6)

Jew Versus Gentile

Paul alludes here to the ancient and historic division that separated Jews from all Gentiles. That division is a classic object lesson illustrating how sin divides what God wants to unite. God's answer to that ancient division is set forth by Paul in the previous chapter, verses 11-18. Speaking of the Gentiles Paul says, "You were separate from Christ, excluded from citizenship...foreigners to the covenants...without hope and without God. But now in Christ Jesus you who were once far away have been brought near through the blood of Christ." Paul continues by explaining what Jesus did to end the historic division. He made "the two one...His purpose was to create in himself one new man out of the two...and in this one body to reconcile both of them to God...Consequently," Paul concludes, "you are no longer foreigners and aliens, but fellow citizens with God's people."

Divisions among people abounded in ancient societies. But none ran deeper than the cleavage between Jew and Gentile. Not even the division between blacks and whites in Birmingham in the middle part of this century ran deeper than the rift Paul is speaking about. And the Jews were happy to keep it that way. They lumped all people on earth who were not Jews together under the pejorative term $\alpha\lambda\epsilon\iota\sigma\tau\epsilon\varsigma$ or τὰ ἔθνη. Jews thought of themselves as a special class of people. They were the chosen of God. Everyone else was second class or worse. How that mentality developed is instructive, but it doesn't belong to the point of our consideration here.

Jew and Gentile

What is important to us is the fact that, according to Paul, God decided to eliminate this ancient and historic division. "His intent was that now, through the church, the manifold wisdom of God should be made known." Eliminating a division as wide, as deep and as long-standing as the rift between Jew and Gentile did not come easy for Christians in the age of the apostles. They didn't always agree that it was the church's task to do so. (See Acts 15 and Galatians 2). If Gentiles wanted to be a part of God's people, let them do so by accepting Judaism. That was the prevailing attitude. If not Judaism in its entirety, then at least some aspects of it. But Paul insisted, "The mystery is that through the gospel the Gentiles are heirs and sharers together in the promise in Christ Jesus."

It is difficult for people living 20 centuries removed from the world of Paul's day to realize what a radical thing it was for Paul to say what he said. Perhaps if we take a brief look at one segment of Jewish society, it will help us appreciate the impact of Paul's understanding of God's mystery had on his contemporaries. One Jewish community is known to us as the Qumran Community (the people who hid the Dead Sea Scrolls). Qumran beliefs and practices also included an emphasis on divine mystery. For them, however, the mystery was the hidden meaning in an Old Testament text which only their own Teacher of Righteousness could disclose by means of a special revelation to which he was privy.

The revelation of divine mystery at Qumran was not intended for everyone. It was intended only for the Qumran community. They were special. They were the choicest of God's chosen people (an attitude that hasn't disappeared from the face of the earth or even from the Christian community today). God's mysteries were not meant to be contaminated by sharing them with others, least of all with Gentiles.

How radically different Paul's view was of the mystery and of the true Teacher of Righteousness. Paul insists that God's revelation came in the person of Jesus Christ. God's intent and purpose was not to highlight

but to heal the festering division between Jew and Gentile. The Qumran Community had no solution to this problem, in fact wasn't even interested in a solution. Nothing in their system proposed a way to make it possible for Gentiles to become a part of the people of God. They viewed their exclusivism as a virtue. It was a badge of honor, a mask of their orthodoxy.

Early Christians applied to themselves the word church (ἐκκλησία, an assembly of persons called out). Members of the Qumran community employed a Hebrew term for themselves with a similar connotation (*edah* - assembly). But in practice the two communities functioned in opposite ways. The Qumran people ended up in complete isolation in the desert in preparation for the coming Messianic age. The Christians in Antioch, Jews and Gentiles, sent Paul and Barnabas and others out into the world, into the mainstream of Gentile life, to the cultural and political centers, to proclaim to all the mystery of God's will. Paul together with the members of his mission congregations saw it as their main business to help heal the division between Jew and Gentile. That was an essential part of God's mystery. "This mystery is that through the gospel the Gentiles are heirs together with Israel, members together of one body, and sharers together the promise in Christ Jesus." Together - together - together, 3 times in one sentence. How much more emphatic could Paul be?

"All this is from God who reconciled us to himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation: that God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting men's against them" (1 Cor. 5:18-19). The church, the body of Christ, is God's object lesson to the world of the reconciliation God has in mind for the world. In Christ, through the church God is consummating that reconciliation. You and I have been chosen by God to live our lives as part of the unfolding of the mystery of his will, a will that is still at work overcoming all that divides men from God and from each other.

Implications

We have emphasized the *cosmic* dimension of the mystery of God's will. We have also recalled the *universal* aspect of our Lord's redemptive work. No one in this world is excluded from the divine judicial declaration that pronounces the world "not guilty" for Jesus' sake. Clearly there are implications in that for our life and work as church. The implications are reflected in our Synod's statement of purpose and objectives as well as in the statement of purpose and objectives contained in the sample constitution proposed for our congregations. Let's take a moment to review it.

Statement of Purpose:

The continuing purpose of this congregation as a gathering of Christians is *to serve all people in God's world* with the Gospel of Jesus Christ on the basis of the Holy Scriptures. (emphasis mine)

Objectives:

To proclaim the Law and the Gospel, to lead sinners to repentance and faith in Jesus Christ for life and salvation.

To strengthen believers in faith and sanctification, through the means of grace.

To equip believers as disciples, stewards, and witnesses for sharing the gospel of Jesus with our fellowmen.

That is a commendable statement and it deserves publicizing and study in our congregations whether or not we have incorporated it into our constitutions. It needs to become a part of our mindset as the people of God. It can serve us all as a preventive or a corrective against developing a mind set that works against the gospel rather than for it.

If we as the people of God have the conviction that God graced us with a full confession of the evangelical faith, we must ever be alert to the dangers to which that conviction exposes us. Evidence points to the fact that we have not always been as alert to those dangers as we ought to be. A Qumran mentality threatens us. We can become so preoccupied with our orthodoxy that we forget what we are orthodox for. We begin to

see orthodoxy as an end in itself rather than means to an end. And if that tendency goes unchecked, our congregations can become little WELLS cloisters instead of distribution centers intent on serving “all people in God’s world with the Gospel of Jesus Christ.” Insulation and isolation become characteristic features of our existence. Instead of finding ways to get into the mainstream in our communities, as Paul and his coworkers did, we are content to form little ghettos for our kind of people. And we become skillful at rationalizing our ineffectiveness, forgetting that if we really have the gospel, then we have the power of God for salvation at our disposal. We have all the reason we need for being the kind of aggressive evangelists we read about in the book of Acts.

Elitism, spiritual pride, ghetto mentality, siege mentality all conspire together against the mystery of God to keep It just that, a mystery to the multitudes. If we are part of the new Israel, then let’s not repeat the mistakes of the old Israel. Let’s not lose the contest by default. Elitism is sin turning attention in upon one’s self, away from others. That is what Israel did. That is what the mystery religions did. That is what the Qumran community did. That kind of elitism is a form of spiritual narcissism, and that spells death to life. It injects poison into the bloodstream of the body of Christ.

There is a remedy for all of this. Jesus pointed us to it when he told Nicodemus, “God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son.” The world was the object of God’s love. So must it be the object of our interest and concern. “Go into all the world and preach the good news to all creation,” Jesus exhorts us.

Two things are of critical importance in those words of Jesus, the field of our activity and the subject of our proclamation. The field is the world, no less. And why not? “Jesus is the atoning sacrifice for our sins, and not only for ours but also for the sins of the whole world” (I Jn. 2:2). That is the subject of our proclamation. That is the good news. You have no good news to share if you distort the gospel. The gospel does not say, “God *will* forgive your sins if you repent and believe.” It says “God *has* forgiven your sins for Jesus’ sake.” God declared the whole world to be forgiven in Christ. He declared all human beings to be righteous in Christ. That is true whether a person believes it or not. That is what makes the new Israel new. That is what keeps on renewing us day after day, inspiring us and filling us with zeal to get that message out to fellow human beings.

If you believe that good news in your heart of hearts, you can’t just sit on it. You can’t just play-act at being Christians. You can’t be satisfied just to gather together as kept Christians in congregational ghettos perpetuating a Lutheran tradition. You are more than a body of Christians, you are the body of Christ. The body of Christ is alive, doing what Christ himself did, serving, sacrificing, reaching out, looking for ways to engage people and to embrace them with the love of God. The body of Christ knows that its best defense is a good offense. In Christ’s church offense is spelled e v a n g e l i s m. That is our one reason for being. Evangelism takes the mystery out of the mystery of God’s will for the world.

“Pray also for me,” Paul says, “that whenever I open my mouth, words may be given me so that I will fearlessly make known the mystery of the gospel” (Eph. 6:19). We can’t pray that for Paul. But we can pray that for each other and for ourselves. We can do more. We can catch the vision, catch the excitement, catch the Spirit, not to keep it for ourselves, but to carry it home, to our families, to our congregations to our neighbors, to our communities.

Paul concludes with an exhortation to Christian soldiers to “Put on the full armor of God.” God has put the sword of the Spirit into your hands. Use it! If I may borrow a line from a current Army recruitment commercial, “Be all that you can be.” Be what you already are. God has made you saints in Christ. Go home and prove it! The fact that God has chosen to let you in on the mystery of his will requires less than that.

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