

"Title"
Ephesians 3:1-13

Introduction

- Have you ever been near a bee hive and watched honey bees for a long period of time? As bees move from one source of nectar to another they eventually make their way back to their colony or nest or hive. They don't fly around alone forever. In fact, the honey bee is a social insect that can survive only as a member of a community, or colony. Honey bees can't survive alone. If they live alone they die. They cannot rear their young apart from the hive. Did you know that the worker bees are responsible for maintaining the brood at exactly 93° F, the optimum temperature required for hatching the eggs and rearing the young.¹ In the winter, they huddle closer to the young in order to the optimum temperature. In the summer, the bees fan their wings to lower the temperature. Without other bees, without the hive, a bee is nothing. The hive is the locus, the epicenter of a bee's work in the world.

Transition

- As Christians, as worker bees for God's kingdom, we too are part of a collective, a hive called the church. And yet many people who call themselves Christians, in fact many people that I have talked to recently, see little practical value in the church. I'll ask them, "are you a Christian?" "Oh, yeah, I love the Lord" they'll say. "Well, where do you go to church?" "Oh, I don't go to church" they respond. Others may place a high value on church attendance but believe they can still live out their Christian lives by themselves. These two extremes have at their core the same issue. A lack of regard, an apathetic lackluster view of God's church. And yet there is hardly an organism more valuable to God than the church as it is expressed universally and locally. Spiritually speaking we are part of something called the Universal Church, God's world-wide church that is united to each other through the bond of Christ. But the universal church is expressed locally, physically, local hives that are microcosms of the one grand hive. And so what scripture says about the universal church necessarily applies to the local hive as well. Local churches are intended to be physical demonstrations of a spiritual reality. It is foolhardy to believe that one can be connected to the universal church but remain disconnected to a local church. Bees die apart from the hive. Christians cannot function, they cannot mature spiritually, they cannot thrive, they cannot be obedient to God's word without the local church. And so we must ask ourselves this question based upon the picture I have painted. Why is the church so important? The answer? The reason the church is so important, the reason that you and I must be willing to die for the scriptural idea of what we call church is that the...

Proposition

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- **The church stands at the very epicenter of what God is doing in this world**

Transition

- If you want to be involved in God's work in this world you must be connected to the church in some fashion. It's the epicenter, the locus, the hive which visibly manifests God's work in this world. Moreover, the church is central to God's idea of where history is going. It is at the heart of God's eternal purposes. The church is absolutely at the very center of the gospel message. And the church is central to Christian living. The church stands at the very epicenter of what God is doing in this world. As [John Stott](#) so aptly puts it, *"If the church is central to God's purpose, as seen in both history and the gospel, it must surely also be central to our lives. How can we take lightly what God takes so seriously?"*² As we move through this passage this morning continually and honestly evaluate the way you express your Christian faith. Do you express your faith simply as an individual apart from the local church or is the very vitality of your faith connected to God's idea of what the church is to be about? Do you have a deep respect and love for the local church? Are you committed to God's idea of the church or your own refashioned stripped down version of what it means to be part of a church? One of God's great purposes for the church is that the church, you and I—connected to each other, would realize the importance and worth of the church's very own existence. And that is why it is so critical that we take to heart the message of Ephesians 3.

Organizational Sentence

- **Ephesians 3:1-13 describes two (2) stages in the unfolding of God's work in this world through the church**

Transition

The church is at the heart of what God is doing in this world. It is vitally important that we understand how this came about, why this is the case. This passage, I believe, helps to answer the question as to why the church is so important by unfolding in two stages the importance of the church.

Background and Setting (10:1)

- Now, before we dig into this passage. A few housekeeping matters. Based upon what Paul exclaimed about the church in 2:19-22, about how the church is the new people of God, how the church is a new nation, how the church is God's temple in which his spirit resides, based upon these great truths, Paul feels led to pray for the Ephesians beginning with 3:1. But his prayer is cut short and he interrupts himself to give his testimony, a biographical excursus, in which the prayer he starts isn't picked up again until verse 14, the passage we'll look at next week.
- Now the subject of Paul's brief rabbit trail is the church. Although it is a break in thought from his prayer, it fits the context of the last half of chapter 2 which talked about the church. Paul's excursus is broken down into two sections, two stages. Verses 1-7 describe the revealing of a great secret, the unveiling of a great mystery—the worth of the church to Paul as an apostle to the Gentiles. Then verses 8-13 describe Paul's work, his purpose in light of

² Stott, p. 129.

having been given this revelation. Stage 1, the worth of the church is revealed to Paul. Stage 2 describes the work of the church in light of its great worth.

Transition

Okay. Let's take a look now at the first stage. The worth of the church is revealed. Verses 1-7.

Main Points

I. The worth of the church revealed (3:1-6)

A) Validation

- i) That the church is worth something is demonstrated by the fact that it has been in the mind of God since day one. God has always been working in this world preparing for a time in which the glory and splendor of the church would be revealed. The Old Testament is ripe with references to the church. Even Jesus talked about it as he commissioned his disciples, Jews, to go and make disciples of all nations. And yet, no one could have imagined, no one could have dreamed up the true nature of the church unless God himself had revealed it. And God specifically revealed this great mystery, the church, to Paul. And it was worth so much to Paul that he was willing to be in chains for it. It's in these verses, 1-7, that **the worth of the church is revealed**.

B) Explanation

- i) As I mentioned earlier, Paul begins to pray for his Gentile readers. But he cuts himself off. *For this reason I, Paul, the prisoner of Christ Jesus for the sake of you Gentiles*—What he cuts himself off with is his own personal testimony. Because of Paul's commitment to preach the gospel to the Gentiles and bring them into the people of God, for that Paul has become a prisoner. And as their leader, as their apostle, the Ephesians probably had become discouraged. Verse 13. *I ask you, therefore, not to be discouraged because of my sufferings for you, which are your glory*. Instead of a pity party, Paul breaks off to explain a great mystery and the reason for which he is in chains.
- ii) Now in verses 2-7 the word mystery is used three times. So its very important that we understand what this mystery is and what Paul means by it. The idea of a mystery in this context is not something that can't be explained, a puzzle, something unsolved, like we normally think of the word. "I don't know how that happened, it's a mystery to me." When Paul uses the word mystery it has the idea of something that was at one time a secret but has been now made known or brought to light. A mystery to Paul is something that is no longer concealed but now revealed expressly through Jesus Christ. We encountered this word already in Ephesians 1:9-10 where the mystery there is God's "ultimate goal in the uniting of all things in heaven and earth in Christ."³
- iii) And so in [verse 2](#), Paul begins to tell about God's grace poured out for himself. On the Damascus road, Paul encountered the risen Christ, and by God's grace was called to be an apostle to the Gentiles. *Surely you have heard about the administration of God's grace that was given to me for you*. "Surely you guys have heard my story. God poured out his grace to me and saved me, Saul, the great persecutor of the church." But God's saving grace also included a vision, the revelation of a mystery.

³ O'Brien, p. 228.

And God's grace and the mystery revealed to Paul are one in the same thing. *Surely you have heard about the administration of God's grace that was given to me for you, 3 that is, the mystery made known to me by revelation, as I have already written briefly.* And Paul has already written about this mystery to the Gentiles in Ephesus in the first two chapters of this letter. Verses 3-14 of chapter one explain all these incredible spiritual blessings because of Christ. On and on Paul goes through chapter one explaining one deep spiritual truth after another, trying to put into words and scratch the surface of the content of this mystery that was revealed to him by Christ on the Damascus road. And Paul wishes that as the Gentiles read about his repeating of the mystery stated earlier in the letter they might understand the mystery that he is laboring (serving) to make known to them on their behalf. Verse 4. *In reading this, then, you will be able to understand my insight into the mystery of Christ.*

- iv) And Paul's insight, the great mystery that was revealed to him and to other apostles and prophets, is that Jews and Gentiles have been completely united to each other through the union of both with Christ.⁴ This was something new. What was not new was that Gentiles would be saved. "But what neither the Old Testament nor Jesus revealed was the radical nature of God's plan, which was that the theocracy (the Jewish nation under God's rule) would be terminated, and replaced by a new international community, the church; that this church would be the 'body of Christ,' organically united to him; and that Jews and Gentiles would be incorporated into Christ and his church on equal terms without distinction. It was this complete union of Jews, gentiles and Christ which was radically new."⁵ The result is the formation of a new organism, a brand new creation, the church. Verse 6. *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.*
 - (a) Paul uses three composite adjectives to describe God's open secret now revealed through Paul's ministry. Gentiles are *fellow heirs*. Recipients of the promise given to Abraham in Genesis 12:2-3. They are *fellow members* of the same body. Jews and Gentiles are on the same footing. Paul actually coins a new word to describe this new union between Jews and Gentiles. They are *sharers together* of the promise. "The word was used in the papyri of those who were "joint possessor" of a house."⁶ Both Jew and Gentile, in this case are sharers together of the promised Holy Spirit.
 - v) This is the content of the revelation that was revealed to Paul. It was for this, the gospel that saves Jew and Gentile into one body for which he was in chains. It was because Paul so believed in this vision of a new society, he believed so much in the worth of the church that he was willing to die for it.

C) Illustration

- i) For the first three weeks of their adult lives, worker bees confine their labors to building the honeycomb, cleaning and polishing the cells, feeding the young and the queen, controlling the temperature, evaporating the water from the nectar until it thickens as honey, and many other miscellaneous tasks. Its like discipleship training for the new Christian. But, at the end of this period, and for the rest of their lives,

⁴ O'Brien, p. 236.

⁵ Stott, p. 118.

⁶ Reinecker, p. 528.

worker bees function as field bees and defenders of the colony.⁷ In fact, bees sting, not because they believe they are in danger, but because they believe the colony is in danger. They value the hive, the community of bees so much, it has such great worth to them that they willingly sacrifice their lives in order to save it.

ii) Should it be any different for us? Should it be any different for the church?

D) Application

- i) What God wants us to see from this passage is that the church, Jew and Gentile reconciled to one another through their reconciliation with Christ, has great worth because it is the physical, visible, tangible revelation of God's great salvation through Christ. You see, all of history has been building to this point right now, the age of the church. And the gospel is the means by which all of this comes about as verse 6 says. In the words of Peter O'Brien says, "*Thus the gospel not only declares what is God's gracious plan, announcing the content of the mystery of Christ; it is also the instrument by which God achieves his purposes of bringing Gentiles to faith and incorporating them into his Son. It is through the active proclamation of the gospel that God draws men and women to himself.*"⁸ What we must realize is that you can't have one without the other. You can't have the gospel that saves without the church. You can't have the church without the gospel. The saving gospel of grace includes the idea of the church. You simply aren't saved. Just me and Jesus. You are saved into something, saved to become part of something grander, bigger than yourself. Saved to become part of the church. And its in the life of the church that our salvation through Christ is lived out.
- ii) And it's this message, the gospel message that saved Gentiles and brought them into fellowship with Jews as part of God's church that Paul was imprisoned for. In fact, think about this. The gospel which produces the new entity of the church is what all of the early Christian martyrs died for. They died for the church. And Paul had the privilege of unfolding the wonder of this great mystery to his readers, that God saves people to become a holy temple, members of his household, part of God's church. Can't you sense the privilege as Paul writes verse 7? *I became a servant of this gospel by the gift of God's grace given me through the working of his power.* It was by God's matchless grace that this vision of the gospel was given to Paul and it was by God's grace that Paul serves to make that gospel known.
- iii) What is your view of the church? Does it have great worth to you? Would you give anything for it? One of God's great purposes for this church is that we come to view the church as something that has great worth. Some of you are probably thinking that I'm just hot under the collar about this because I'm a pastor. "It's my job to love the church." Let me just say this. I don't have bees in my shorts about the importance of the church because its my job, rather its because I love the gospel.

Transition

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⁸ O'Brien, p. 236.

Remember, **the church stands at the very epicenter of what God is doing in this world. It is so incredibly valuable to God.** Stage 1, the worth of the church is revealed to Paul. Stage 2 describes the work of the church in light of its great worth. Verses 8-13.

II. The work of the church in displaying that worth (3:7-13)

A) Validation

- i) The church is incredibly valuable in its own right. But the church's calling, its mission also makes it valuable. The church has the responsibility of dispensing the very riches of Christ. And as the church fulfills this mission, it actually displays the very wisdom of God. No other institution, no other para-church ministry, no other entity that works on God's behalf can make that claim.

B) Explanation

- i) Verses 8-13 deal very specifically with Paul's commission to be Christ's missionary in light of this great revelation he has received. His task? Look at verse 8. *To preach to the Gentiles the unsearchable riches of Christ, 9 and to make plain to everyone the administration of this mystery, which for ages past was kept hidden in God, who created all things.* Paul's task is to preach the content of this great mystery of the church. This mystery which was hidden but has now been revealed by the great creator God, the god who created all things and now has created something new, his church. And Paul's completely humbled by the prospect of this task set before him. He is the dispenser of heavenly treasures and riches unending. The gospel message which produces the church is golden. It's a gold egg laying goose. And so he begins the second half of his testimony by calling himself *less than the least of all God's people*. This is a striking expression which shows how deeply conscious he is of his own unworthiness in light of the task before him.⁹ Paul is literally saying using a comparative of a superlative, a grammatical faux pas, to say something like he's "less than the least of the least," or the "leaster" of all God's people.¹⁰ Something you simply don't say if the task for which you labor is worthless.

- (a) Do you realize the significance of what Paul is saying? The church, as we continue the mission that was given to Paul and the other apostles, is the dispenser of riches. Unfathomable, infinite riches. People are enriched, not impoverished, as they respond to the church's message, the news of a gospel that saves. The church's role is to lavish these riches on those outside the fold. Your task, as ministers of the gospel of Jesus Christ is to serve as God's treasure dispensers.
- (b) What is the glory of a beehive? The most prized food of the honeycomb is not honey but royal jelly. Royal jelly is "A nutritious substance secreted by the pharyngeal glands of worker bees that serves as food for all young larvae and as the only food for larvae that will develop into queen bees."¹¹ As worker bees for God's kingdom, we have a slightly different calling. Not to hoard the royal jelly,

⁹ O'Brien, p. 240.

¹⁰ O'Brien, p. 240.

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the riches of the gospel of Jesus Christ, but to dispense it and in doing so feed a hungry and starving world. We offer them no fast food meal, but the richest of fare.

- ii) As if that weren't enough to get you on board with what the church is about, Paul gets to another amazing idea in verses [verses 10-11](#) which describe the purpose behind this task of making plain the gospel. *His intent was that now, through the church, the manifold wisdom of God should be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly realms, 11 according to his eternal purpose which he accomplished in Christ Jesus our Lord.* The reason why you and I through the ministry of God's church, are to dispense the riches of Christ Paul is so that we might reveal God's manifold, his multifaceted, variegated wisdom. What does this mean? "The compound adjective meaning 'manifold, variegated, very many sided' was poetic in origin, referring to an intricately embroidered pattern of 'many colored cloaks' or the manifold hues of a 'garland of flowers.' It is used here in a figurative sense to speak of the richly diversified nature of God's divine wisdom."¹² And this wisdom is proclaimed or made known to the cosmic powers and authorities. Angels, good and bad, spiritual beings are schooled by the church as it lives out its calling. As John Stott says, "History is the theater, the world is the stage, and church members in every land are the actors. God himself has written the play, and he directs and produces it. Act by act, scene by scene, the story continues to unfold. But who are the audience? They are the cosmic intelligences, the principalities and powers in the heavenly places. We are to think of them as spectators of the drama of salvation. Thus the history of the Christian church becomes a graduate school for angels."¹³ What is amazing is not even that this takes place but that this enlightening of the principalities and powers is effected through the church.¹⁴ To say that the church is useless, worthless, of little consequence, to say that is dispensable is to spit in the face of God who has deemed in his eternal purposes that the church, you and I living out our salvation together, is the very means by which God's rich tapestry of wisdom is displayed to the universe. The church matters. It stands at the very epicenter of God's work in this world.
- (a) It is incredibly humbling to realize that this game we are playing called church is more than just a game. We are literally schooling the angels as to the wisdom of God. And so the question we must ask ourselves is what kind of school is in session? Are we showing God to be a fool by the way we do church? Or are we revealing the manifold, multifaceted, diamond like wisdom of God? Church matters. It matters a whole lot to God. And it should matter to you.
- iii) And so Paul closes this excurses with a great encouragement to believers. Go to God. Approach him with boldness and great freedom. You matter! Your calling matters. You're important in my grand scheme of things. Don't be discouraged. My suffering is furthering the purposes of God, making wise his plan of salvation. *In him and through faith in him we may approach God with freedom and confidence. 13 I ask you, therefore, not to be discouraged because of my sufferings for you, which are your glory.*

¹² O'Brien, p. 245.

¹³ Stott, p. 124.

¹⁴ O'Brien, p. 245-6.

C) Application

- i) But this passage is also a great encouragement and incentive to evangelism. As Christians, we are all stewards of the mystery of Jesus Christ. And as Stott says, *“All revealed truth is to be held in stewardship. It is given to be shared, not monopolized. If men cannot keep their scientific discoveries to themselves how much less should we keep to ourselves the divine disclosure? Once we are sure that the gospel is both truth from God and riches for mankind, nobody will be able to silence us.”*¹⁵ We must share and share freely because we are dispensing heavenly riches. Although unworthy of the task, like Paul, that is what we are called to.

Conclusion

- Have you ever had the experience of waking up one day to realize you’ve become something different than you dreamed you’d become? This past week, I Miriam and I watched a chick flick entitled **13 going on 30**. It’s the story about a teenage girl who wishes something for her life as a teenager that when it comes true turns her into something she ashamed of. Jenna Rink, closes her eyes as a thirteen year old in the closet of the basement of her house and, after being sprinkled with wishing dust, opens her eyes as a 30 year old schemer, adulterer, liar, sell-out, friendless hopeless fashion mogul. And its through this experience of realizing that she had become something she never intended that she gets her priorities straight and finds the true love her life and so on.
- As God’s church, we are no longer thirteen years old anymore. This church has been around for close to 50 years. When are we going to wake up and realize that maybe we’ve become something as God’s church that we weren’t intended to become. Paul had a dream, a vision of a new society. We must recapture that dream, for it is not only God’s dream for us; at stake is the integrity of the gospel itself. We must become a living, breathing blueprint of God’s idea of church, not our own, if we are to wear the proud moniker, the glorious title of CHURCH. Will you pray with me?

¹⁵ Stott, p. 120-1.