

The Mystery of the Gospel – Part 1

Introduction

a. objectives

1. subject – Paul discusses the mystery of the gospel as the message of the inclusion of Gentiles
2. aim – to cause us to clearly and properly define the central message of the gospel to the world
3. passage – Ephesians 3:1-13

b. outline

1. The Importance of the Mystery (Ephesians 3:1-5)
2. The Content of the Mystery (Ephesians 3:6)
3. The Deliverer of the Mystery (Ephesians 3:7-13)

c. opening

1. an **example** to help understand **Ephesians 3**
 - a. how would a roomful of the attendees of a wide variety of churches answer this question: “what is the central message of the gospel of Jesus Christ; what *defines* the ‘faith once delivered to the saints’ as you understand it within your tradition?”
 - b. (**obviously**) the answers given would be many and varied
 1. some: the gospel is the message of how you “get to heaven” or “get out of hell”
 2. some: the gospel is the message of how you can “live your best life now”
 3. some: the gospel is the message of how you can get involved in social justice issues
 - c. (**in a way**) **Ephesians 3:1-13** addresses this question by driving to the heart of what “separates” the church *in any given age* (**hold that thought ...**)
2. the **rhetorical division** that begins **Ephesians 3 (v. 1)**
 - a. it is clear that Paul is about to draw his personal authority into a conclusion:
 1. his own authority (“I, Paul”) is the *basis* for what he wants to say next (**see “1” in vv. 7ff**)
 2. “*for this reason*” = based on what I have written above (**note vv. 3b-4a**), I now say to you ...
 - b. it would appear that chap. 3 **would have** begun the *imperative* section of the book
 1. **indicatives** = the doctrinal truths that are foundational to his point in writing to them
 - a. **#1**: God purposes to adopt a people to himself and lavish them with his spiritual riches
 - b. **#2**: God creates this people by choosing to raise them from their spiritual deadness to faith
 - c. **#3**: God draws this people together into a new structure as living stones of worship to him
 - d. **note: 1:15-23** is simply Paul’s prayer that the Ephesians would “get this”
 2. **imperatives** = the responses (by command) that come out as a result of these truths
 - a. it appears that Paul *started* down the path of applying these truths more specifically to them
 - b. but he breaks off at the end of **v. 1** because he realizes something ...
 1. note the **large dash** at the end of the verse (in modern English Bibles)
 2. note how he picks up his *original* thought again in **v. 14** (“*For this reason ...*”)
 - c. there may be some in Ephesus who do not accept his authority, and/or
 - d. there may be some in Ephesus who do not yet fully understand the “*mystery*” of the gospel
 - c. it is clear that Paul **pauses** in bringing specific instruction to the Ephesians in order to be sure that they fully understand what he has *already said* (**i.e. in chaps. 1-2**)
 1. thus, **3:1-13** appears to be (IMO) a **transition** between indicative and imperative
3. the **ecclesiological division** addressed at the beginning of **Ephesians 3 (by way of review)**
 - a. an ethnic divide (**i.e. Jew and Gentile**) has (probably) worked its way into the church, and has led some non-Jewish believers into thinking that they are “second-class citizens” in the church
 - b. this ethnic divide has also caused him to be imprisoned (**note Acts 22:21-22**)
 1. going to the Gentiles (and offering them a “messiah”) proved too much for the Jews
 - c. this may have been the **specific** reason why Paul chose to write this letter to Ephesus
 1. see how Paul *here* is clearly speaking to Gentiles (**again, see 2:11f**)
 - d. thus, this division was the issue **du jour** for Paul – it is different for us (**see below**)

I. The Importance of the Mystery (Ephesians 3:1-5)

Content

a. the definition of *mystery*

1. the word appears **x3** in this pericope (**vv. 3, 4, 6**) – implying it is the *theme* of the passage
2. the **common** definition: something which is both *unknown* and (more importantly) *unknowable*
 - a. **e.g.** the concept of gravity – the sense in which objects attract one another (yet unexplainable)
 - b. **e.g.** the Trinity – the triune nature of one God in three Persons; with no analogy in the world
 1. **i.e.** we think because it is incomparable to our *experience*, we cannot truly understand it
 2. but, the Trinity *is* knowable in a theoretical sense; it is an *implied* and *revealed* proposition – it can be understood, although not in the “scientific” or “experimental” or “analogous” sense
 3. many things that are difficult cannot just be dismissed as “mystery” (**the “weak” minded**)
3. the **biblical** definition: something that was *previously unknown* (not unknowable), but is now known specifically (and only) by those to whom it has been revealed (**i.e.** the “initiates”)
 - a. **e.g.** the nature, person, and actions of the Messiah (the Christ) – only understood through symbolism or foreshadow or through the periphery (**i.e.** not looked *directly* at)
 - b. here: a *now-revealed* truth regarding the message of the gospel of Jesus Christ

b. the use of *mystery* in this context

1. Paul references several aspects of this mystery here:
 - a. this mystery has now been “heard” or “made known” or has been a “revelation” (**v. 3**)
 - b. this mystery is what Paul has “written briefly to them” (**v. 3**) that they can now “read” (**v. 4**)
 - c. this mystery was “not made known” to previous “generations” (**v. 5**)
 - d. this mystery has now come through the “holy apostles” and “prophets” by “the Spirit” (**v. 5**)
 - e. this mystery contains “my insights” into the person and work of “Christ” (**v. 4**)

c. the importance of this *mystery* in the church

1. **Paul stops his foray into the imperatives in the letter because he does not want to be wrong in “assuming” that his readers fully understand the *impact* of this revelation (v. 2)**
 - a. Paul asserts that all he has written in **chaps. 1-2** is a “mystery” **now revealed**, and
 - b. Paul desires that the **impact** of this revelation has “fully landed” in their minds and hearts
 - c. so, Paul refuses to proceed into his “advice” (imperatives) until he makes sure they “get it”
 1. because he knows that this mystery, when fully understood, will solve all matters of division

II. The Content of the Mystery (Ephesians 3:6)

Content

a. the substance of the *mystery*

1. that the Gentiles (**i.e.** non-Jews) are (aligned with the **indicatives** above):
 - a. “fellow heirs” – fully included in the plans of God to an elect people
 1. **i.e.** non-Jews have always been a part of the *divine decree*
 - b. “members of the same body” – brought together in the same way and to the same goal
 1. **i.e.** non-Jews have always been assumed to be saved *by grace through faith* (not law)
 - c. “partakers of the promise” – participants in all that God has promised to his elect people
 1. **i.e.** non-Jews have always been a part of God’s *promises and purposes*
2. **what should now be understood by every believing Gentile (and believing Jew) is that God’s intention has always been to draw his elect from every ethnic group and to include them as absolute equals in his church under Jesus Christ his Son**
 - a. for centuries, this was not widely known, but now it has been fully revealed **in the gospel**

b. the reality of this *mystery* to the Ephesians

1. so, there should be no artificial “separation” amongst the elect in the church

c. the reality of this *mystery* to us

1. the *ethnic* (*ethno-religious*) separation/division in the church was the issue **du jour** for Paul
2. but, there is a *much larger* form of separation in the church today (and it’s not racial division)
 - a. **reality: the separation that exists amongst the various “branches” of Christendom today is primarily one of *gospel definition* (rather than ethnic or racial tension)**
 - b. **i.e.** what separates us today is how we **define** the gospel itself – or, how we define the **kerygma**, the message (or preaching) at the heart of the plans of God and the work of Christ
 - e. **i.e.** thus, it is imperative that the church (like ours!) gets this message right before the world (**T4G**)