**THE PRIVILEGE OF KNOWING AND SHARING GOD’S MYSTERY**

***For this reason I, Paul, the prisoner of Christ Jesus for the sake of you Gentiles –***

***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***

Ephesians 3:1-6 (NIV)

There is a pattern in these first three chapters. In chapter 1 Paul’s outline of the wealth of blessings of God in Christ led naturally to prayer. In chapter 2 he developed further this great theme of the purpose of God in Christ, as he wrote of the amazing grace of God in bringing those dead in sin to new life in Christ and of the far-reaching significance of the reconciling of Jew and Gentile together in the one people of God. This leads him to prayer again and he begins ‘*For this reason I, Paul, the prisoner of Christ Jesus for the sake of you Gentiles*’ (3:1) but before he can add ‘*I kneel before the Father* …’ (3:14) his thoughts go to his ministry calling and the nature of his relationship to his readers for whom he is about to pray, ‘*I, Paul, the prisoner of Christ Jesus for the sake of you Gentiles*’ (3:1). Because he was the apostle to the Gentiles, and very directly as a result of his stand for the equality of Jews and Gentiles in the people of God (Acts 21:17-34; 22:21-24; 26:12-23) he was in prison. His imprisonment was very much ‘*for the sake of you Gentiles*’ (3:1). To outward appearances he was the prisoner of Rome but inwardly he saw himself as ‘*the prisoner of Christ Jesus*’ (3:1).

Dwelling on his calling as the apostle to the Gentiles, he notes ‘*the administration of God’s grace that was given to me for you*’ (3:1). ‘*Administration’* (cf. 1:10) means either the administration of a household or the office of the one who administered it. To express this trust he uses the word ‘*grace*.’ While we think of its meaning in terms of the undeserved favour and enabling of God to come to Christ and live the Christian life, Paul often used it to express the privilege of being given a work to do for Christ (Romans 12:3,6; Ephesians 4:7). In his own case it was the amazing favour of God to be called to be an apostle (Romans 15:15,16; 1 Corinthians 3:10). Paul may have had a second application of God’s grace in mind as well. There is a grace to the Gentiles that apostles were sent to them in the first place. Paul may have entwined both aspects (God’s grace to call Gentiles and his call to be their apostle).

Paul uses the word ‘*mystery’* three times in 3:1-13: ‘*the mystery made known to me by revelation* (3:3) … *you will be able to understand my insight into the mystery of Christ* (3:4) … *to make plain the administration of this mystery’* (3:9). Our English word doesn’t have the exact meaning as Paul’s Greek word. In English a mystery is something secret and obscure. Anything ‘mysterious’ is inexplicable. Paul’s word was used of something open, something no longer closely guarded. Originally, the word referred to a truth that only those ‘initiated’ knew and understood. In this sense it came to be used of the secret teachings of heathen, mystery religions, teachings which were restricted to initiates. But in Christianity there are no ‘mysteries’ reserved for the spiritually elite. Christian ‘mysteries’ are truths which, while beyond human discovery, have been revealed by God and so now belong to the whole church.

What is the revealed secret ‘*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*’ (3:5) and uniquely ‘*made known to me by revelation*’ (3:3)? He calls it ‘*the mystery of Christ*’ (3:4; cf. Colossians 4:3) meaning Christ is both its source and substance. Specifically, the 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’* (3:6). So the mystery concerns Christ and His one Jewish-Gentile people.

To define it more closely, Paul uses three terms. Each has a Greek prefix that means ‘together with.’ Together these three terms describe both what Gentile believers now have and their partnership with Jewish believers. Gentiles are ‘*heirs together’* (3:6), ‘*members together’* (3:6) and ‘*sharers together’* (3:6). Gentile and Jewish Christians are now fellow heirs of the same blessing, fellow members of the same body and fellow partakers of the same promise. And this shared privilege is both ‘*in Jesus Christ’* (3:6), because it is enjoyed equally by all believers, whether Jews or Gentiles, because they are in union with Christ, and ‘*through the gospel’* (3:6) because the gospel proclamation makes it available to believers.

In summary, ‘*the mystery of Christ’* is the complete union of Jews and Gentiles with each other through the union of both with Christ. This double union, with Christ and with each other, is the substance of the ‘mystery.’ God had revealed it to Paul but it also had been made known to God’s ‘*holy apostles and prophets’* by the Holy Spirit(3:5) and through them *‘to the saints’* (Colossians 1:26).

This ‘*mystery’* was ‘*not made known to men in other generations* ‘(3:5). How are we to understand this knowing that the Old Testament revealed something of God’s purposes for Gentiles – that all the families of the earth would be blessed through Abraham’s family (Genesis 12:1-3), that the Messiah would receive the nations as His inheritance (Psalm 2:8), that Israel was given as a light to the nations (Isaiah 42:6; 49:6) and that one day the nations would make pilgrimage to Jerusalem (Isaiah 2:2-4)? Jesus also spoke of the inclusion of the Gentiles and told His disciples to disciple the nations. But what neither the Old Testament nor Jesus revealed was the radical nature of God’s plan, that the theocracy of 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 and Gentiles into Christ which was radically new and which God revealed to Paul (cf. Galatians 1:12)

Without direct referencing these studies have drawn, sometimes heavily, on:

‘*The Epistles to the Colossians and the Ephesians’* (Tyndale New Testament Commentaries) by F. F. Bruce (William B Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, Michigan, 1984)

*‘Ephesians’* (Tyndale New Testament Commentaries) by F. Foulkes (Inter-Varsity Press, Nottingham, England, 1989)

*‘The Message of Ephesians’* (The Bible Speaks Today Series) by John R. W. Stott (Inter-Varsity Press, Nottingham, England, 1999)

‘*The Prison Letters* (Paul for Everyone)’ by Tom Wright (SPCK, London, 2004)

‘*Vine’s Complete Expository Dictionary of Old and New Testament Words’* by W. E. Vine (Thomas Nelson, Nashville, TN, 1996)