

A Gospel For Everyone

Ephesians 3:1-12

January 6, 2008

Rev. Chris Cadenhead

It's a strange feeling being the outsider, being on someone else's turf. It happened to me, for example, when I visited Romania. I am not an accomplished traveler, so I don't get excited about arriving in a place where no one speaks my language. It was bad enough that after an 8-hour flight I couldn't tell which one was the men's room. But nothing prepared me for the awkwardness I would experience when it was time to go through customs.

The uniformed agent asked me with his beautifully thick Romanian accent to show him my passport, which I promptly did. Though the passport was valid, the photograph it showed of me was almost 10 years old. My appearance had changed quite a bit since my junior year in college. Wanting to insure that I really was the guy in the picture, the agent asked me if I could show him any other identification. I quickly produced my state issued driver's license, confident that would clear up any questions. Imagine my horror when the agent handed my license back to me and informed me with his broken English that it was expired.

The good news is that the fear I experienced at learning I had been driving on an expired license quickly evaporated. The bad news is that it was replaced by the even greater fear of realizing that I was a stranger in a strange land with no way of proving that I was who I said I was.

"Do you have any other ID?" the agent asked.

"No," I said sheepishly, my voice cracking an octave or two higher than its normal pitch.

Now, what happened next remains a bit of mystery to me. Either this guy was feeling extremely generous, or he was near the end of his shift and didn't feel like bothering with another American tourist. Either way he handed my passport back to me and said gruffly, "Have nice trip." But for that, I might still be standing in the customs line at the Timisoara international airport.

Like I said, its strange being the outsider, knowing that you are on someone else's turf and that you are at their mercy. I don't know where or when you have tasted that experience – maybe when you traveled to a foreign country, or maybe when you started at a new school, or took a new job, or joined a new organization whose rituals you did not yet know. Wherever that has happened for you, I encourage you to go there in your mind for a few moments this morning

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and place yourself back into that feeling of awkwardness. Because until you do, I am not sure our Scripture passage from Ephesians will make much sense to you.

Paul – or, if the scholars are right, students of Paul who write in his name following his death – speaks in Ephesians of an incredible mystery. Only, its not the mystery we might expect to read about just two weeks after Christmas. You and I just spent the last month of our lives and more money than we want to count celebrating the mystery of the incarnation, the mystery of God becoming a human being in the person of Jesus Christ. Rightly or wrongly, it has become the single biggest celebration of our entire year, drawing more energy and attention than even Easter.

The interesting thing, though, is that for all the attention we give to the birth of Jesus, the Bible gives it considerably less. In fact, the Bible speaks directly of Jesus' birth only twice – once in Matthew and once in Luke. The gospel of John makes a passing allusion to it, as does the epistle of 1 John. Other than that, Jesus' birth is never discussed – not a single time by the Apostle Paul.

I don't think it's the case that Paul doesn't care about the mystery of Jesus' birth. Rather, its that Paul is overwhelmed by the even greater mystery that stems from it. For Paul, the real mystery of the Gospel is not that God would become one with us by being born of a virgin. No, the real scandal is that because Jesus was born of virgin, we are invited to become one with God.

To unpack why that is so, let's talk for a moment about who the "us" is and who the "we" are in those last two sentences. In case you are unfamiliar with ancient Jewish culture, it is helpful to know that from the time of Abraham right on up to the time of Jesus, the Jews divided the people of the world into two categories: us and them. The "us" were the Jews, the descendents of Abraham. The "them" were the Gentiles, or everybody else. If you were a descendent of Abraham, you were Jewish. Everybody else was a Gentile.

You must also understand that this distinction was more than just a helpful way of naming people's ethnicity. It was a way of understanding their status before God. You see, according to Jewish understanding, the promises that God had made to Abraham were the exclusive property of the Jewish people. When God had said to Abraham, "I will make you into

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a great nation... I will bless those who bless you, and whoever curses you I will curse;" when God had said "to you and your offspring I will give this land;" when God had said, "you will be my people and I will be your God," the people of Israel understood God to be talking to them and about them and for them to the exclusion of everyone else. That meant that the Gentiles were just plain out of luck. They had no claims on God, no rights to any of His blessings, and no chance to inherit any of his promises.

You get a sense of the tension this created even in the Old Testament in, for example, the book of Jonah. If you remember that story then you know that Jonah, an Israelite, was commanded by God to go to the land of Nineveh and preach. But Jonah didn't want to go, so he hopped a ship and headed for Tarshish. You also remember that the ship encountered a fierce storm and that the sailors threw Jonah overboard, at which point Jonah was swallowed by a giant fish. It wasn't until the fish finally vomited Jonah up on dry land that he consented, begrudgingly, to go to Nineveh.

Why was Jonah so resistant? It was because the Ninevites were Gentiles, and Jonah was afraid that if he went and preached to them they might actually repent and that God would reward their repentance with the blessings of heaven – which, as it turns out, is exactly what happened. But Jonah couldn't bear the thought of those old nasty pagan Gentile Ninevites tasting the goodness of God, a goodness that he believed should be the sole possession of his fellow Israelites.

Jump ahead a few hundred years to the time just after Jesus' resurrection and ascension into heaven and you discover that something remarkable – something unthinkable, even – has happened. The very Gentiles that Jonah had so detested, the ones Israel believed were outside the boundaries of God's blessings – they have responded to the good news of Jesus Christ and have been welcomed into the church in manifold numbers. You read about that happening throughout the book of Acts. As the gospel is proclaimed further and further out from Jerusalem – that is to say, further and further out from the center of Jewish identity – the Gentiles respond and come to faith in Jesus Christ. It took the early church leaders quite by surprise and forced them to reconsider everything they thought they knew about God, but they came to the

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unavoidable conclusion that the gift of God's Holy Spirit had been poured just as fully on Gentile believers as it had Jewish believers. In fact, they eventually come to the realization that the mark of being a true Israelite was no longer being a blood descendent of Abraham. Rather, it was being a faithful disciple of Jesus Christ, Israel's redeemer. Faith, not heredity, was now what mattered.

Which brings us to the book of Ephesians. Paul, or whoever it is that is writing in his name, is absolutely amazed, flabbergasted, dumbfounded, that the Gentiles would be included in God's eternal plan of salvation, so much so that he can barely find the words to express it. In fact, he rambles on for four and a half chapters trying to plumb the depths of this incredible mystery. We tend to think of Paul as the strict moralist who is always writing to tell people what they should and should not do. But in Ephesians, which is only six chapters long, for the first four and half chapters there is not a single ethical imperative to be found. In other words, for the first two thirds of this letter Paul never says anything about what the readers should or should not do. His attention is totally enraptured by this unspeakable mystery that the Gentiles are now included.

And what makes it even more incredible is that Paul now realizes this was God's plan all along. God had given Israel enough clues to that end all along the way, clues they had missed or overlooked. But Paul can't overlook them or ignore them anymore. He now knows that the inclusion of the Gentiles in the plan of salvation was not an afterthought. It was not as though God's original plan to save Israel had failed and so now he had to go out and create a plan B to make all that trouble of sending Jesus into the world worth the effort. No, from the very beginning this is what God intended.

That is why the story of the Magi is so important. We cannot miss the significance of the fact that when Matthew, a Jew writing to a Jewish audience, tells us his account of the birth of Jesus, the first people he has visiting the new born Jewish king are not the priests or the Pharisees. The first visitors are Gentiles from the Far East. Their worship of the child Jesus is a sign that this is a savior for all peoples, just as the prophet Isaiah had foretold.

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And Paul is in awe of it all. He cannot fathom the grace of a God who would do such a thing. All he can do is write, “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 of Christ Jesus.”

Who knew?

Well, we act as though we did. We read the prophecy of Isaiah and the visit of the Magi and the excited ramblings of Paul and think to ourselves, “What’s the big deal?” What the Bible proclaims as an utter mystery we, who read with 2000 years of hindsight, regard as obvious and commonplace. Because of the twists and turns of history, we no longer regard it as a surprise that the Gentiles would be included in the church; we take it as an inevitable fact – one that’s just always been true. Of course the Gentiles are included, we think to ourselves. I mean, just look around. Here we are this morning, a bunch of Gentiles, a bunch of outsiders, a bunch of folk who have no claims on God, no rights to his promises, all claiming to be church, all worshipping a Jewish Messiah, as though that’s no big deal.

In fact, we take it all as such a given that somewhere along the way we started acting like we own the place. Somewhere along the way we forgot that we were once the outsiders, and that we got to come to the party only because of the gracious invitation of the host. Somewhere along the way we forgot that we are like a strangers standing in the customs line in a foreign land, who are at the mercy of someone else who gets decide whether we are given admittance or not. We aren’t here this morning because we were smart enough to figure out that it would be good to get together and have a little religious inspiration. None of this is our idea. We are here because a long, long time ago, God decided that he wanted to have a family, and for reasons we will never fully understand, he decided to include folks like us as family members.

One wonders whether we will ever be able to recapture the incredible sense of awe that such an announcement evoked for the Apostle Paul. We are so far down the road of history that it is difficult for us to imagine that things could have ever turned out any differently than they have. It’s hard for us to envision the possibility that the birth of Jesus might not have been for us. Imagine for just a moment that what we celebrated on Christmas Eve could have been

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withheld from us. Imagine that there was no savior, at least not for us. Imagine that the only thing we had to celebrate were the few meager achievements we manage to scratch out of the chaos of life. Imagine that the only good news we had to celebrate were our feeble efforts to make the world turn out right, which history has proved time and again to be woefully inadequate. Imagine that we really did own the place and that we really are on our own.

As much as it may stretch our minds and spirits, we need to imagine it, because it could have been that way. God was under no obligation to lay out his plan of salvation the way he did. He did not have to include us.

Darrell Guder teaches theology at Columbia Seminary outside of Atlanta. He writes about a conversation he once had with a student who very wisely observed, “I see a lot of people in the church who don’t have any experience of the blessings of the gospel anymore but are still trying to do the mission [of the gospel].”¹ How true. If we try to busy ourselves with the work of doing church – serving on committees, teaching Sunday School classes, engaging in the work of Christian mission – if we try to busy ourselves with all that without first experiencing the blessing of having received the grace of God in Jesus Christ, then we will have succeeded only at making ourselves busy. But busyness doesn’t transform the world. God does. What makes us Christian is not first and foremost all the stuff we do in and through the church. What makes us Christian is the fact that God reached out to us in Jesus Christ to draw us back into his family when we were completely alienated from him.

So, now I can be honest with you and let you in on the struggle I am having as a preacher this morning. You bothered to come today, so I feel like I am supposed to make it worth your while by closing with some good advice or a little moral instruction on how to get along a little better in life this week. But the task before this morning is at once more daunting and more glorious than that. Our task, our calling, our joy is to simply marvel at the incredible grace of a God who would do such a thing, a God who for no good reason other than the fact that He chose to do so would include you and me. Our task, our calling, our joy, is to experience the blessing

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of the gospel. Our task, our calling, our joy is to simply humble ourselves before this God and say “Thank You.”

To Jesus Christ be all praise and glory, both now and forever, Amen.

¹ Darrell L. Guder, *The Continuing Conversion of the Church* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 2000), 151.