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THE UNIQUENESS OF THE CHURCH

Tom's Perspectives
by Thomas Ice

Dispensational, pretribulationists believe that the New Testament teaches that the current Church Age is unique when contrasted with previous and future dispensations. We believe that the church was always a part of God's eternal plan or decree, but that it was a mystery, not revealed until New Testament times. Such New Testament uniqueness is one of the major reasons that support the rapture of the body of Christ at the end of this age, before the beginning of the 70th week of Daniel. Why do we believe that this is the New Testament teaching?

MISCHARACTERIZATION

It is common to hear from anti-dispensationalist, such as Dr. Kenneth Gentry, saying that dispensationalists believe that Israel was God's plan A, which failed, so He belatedly came up with plan B—the church.¹ Dr. Gentry quotes from the late Dr. John Walvoord as follows:

It becomes apparent that a new thing has been formed—the body of Christ. It did not exist before Pentecost, as there was no work of the baptism of the Spirit to form it. The concept of the body is foreign to the Old Testament and to Israel's promises. Something new had begun. . . . there is good evidence that the age itself is a parenthesis in the divine program of God as it was revealed in the Old Testament. . . . the present age as an unexpected and unpredicted parenthesis as far as Old Testament prophecy is concerned.²

Dr. Gentry then provides the following *spin* on Dr. Walvoord's statement:

What he is saying here is that God had an original plan A. It had to do with the program for Israel. God's special program was for Israel. Israel is the apple of God's eye and God's concern was initially with them. . . . The church of Jew and Gentile mixed together is something, according to Walvoord, totally unknown. . . . It makes the church an unknown entity and a temporary interruption in the main plan of God. . . . Dispensationalists say the church is unknown, its temporary, its an aside in the plan of God.³

THE TRUTH OF THE MATTER

Dispensationalists do not believe that God has a plan B in any way, shape or form. In almost 35 years, since I have become a dispensationalist, I have never heard or read of a dispensationalist teaching the plan B scenario. Yet opponents often present this straw man in their statements of what we supposedly believe. We believe that God's single plan has always included the church, but He did not reveal the church age part of the plan in the Old Testament. This is the teaching of Paul in Ephesians 2 and 3.

After having explained to the Ephesian Christians how God has taken elect Jews and Gentiles and placed "the two into one new man" (Eph. 2:15), he proceeds in chapter three to describe how this truth was a mystery, never before revealed in the Old Testament.

Paul calls this new revelation "the stewardship of God's grace which was given to

me for you” in verse two of chapter three. The word that the NASB translates “stewardship” is rendered “dispensation” by the KJV. This is one of the places where “dispensation” is used in the Bible (see also 1 Cor. 9:17; Eph. 1:10; Col. 1:25) and is where the modern use of *dispensationalism* is derived. How was the dispensation of God’s grace given to Paul? Ephesians 3:3 tells us that it was “by revelation.” I believe that Jesus in His Upper Room Discourse (John 13—17) gave a brief introduction of church age truth to His disciples. Yet Jesus said, “I have many more things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now. But when He, the Spirit of truth, comes, He will guide you into all the truth; for He will not speak on His own initiative, but whatever He hears, He will speak; and He will disclose to you what is to come” (John 16:12-13). One of the many more things that Jesus revealed, in this case to Paul, was “the mystery, as I wrote before in brief.” When did Paul previously and briefly speak of the mystery? Most likely in Ephesians 1:9-10!

THE MYSTERY

What does Paul mean by the term “mystery”? “Biblically a mystery is a divine truth that God had not disclosed in Old Testament times but did reveal to the New Testament apostles and prophets to proclaim freely to everyone who will listen,”⁴ declares Dr. John Witmer. More specially, Dr. Harold Hoehner says, “in Ephesians the mystery is that believing Jews and Gentiles are now one in the body of Christ.” He continues:

the mystery mentioned in Ephesians was hidden in God in ages past (3:9). It was something that could not be understood by human ingenuity or study. God revealed it to the apostles and prophets by the Spirit (3:4). Now that it is revealed, it is open to everyone and it is simple to understand and thus not relegated to an intellectual minority. Ephesians views God’s sacred secret as believing Jews and Gentiles united into one body. In the OT Gentiles could be a part of the company of God, but they had to become Jews in order to belong to it. In the NT Gentiles do not become Jews nor do Jews become Gentiles. Rather, both believing Jews and Gentiles become one new entity, Christians (Eph. 2:15-16). That is the mystery.⁵

What is the content of the mystery that Paul speaks of in this passage? He tells us plainly in 3:6 when he says, “to be specific, that the Gentiles are fellow heirs and fellow members of the body, and fellow partakers of the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel.” This summarizes what he had explained in Ephesians 2—the coequality of saved Jews and Gentiles in the Body of Christ.

Paul says that the specific purpose of his ministry (verses 7-8) is “to bring to light what is the administration of the mystery which for ages has been hidden in God, who created all things; in order that the manifold wisdom of God might now be made known through the church to the rulers and the authorities in the heavenly places” (verses 9-10). In previous ages—before New Testament times—God purposely hid His intentions from all, including the angelic world, because He wants to teach them something through this new organism known as the church. Thus, pedagogy is the reason for the progressive revelation of His plan.

Further, Paul states specifically that the church age “was in accordance with the eternal purpose which He carried out in Christ Jesus our Lord” (verse 11). This is why dispensationalists have never taught the so-called plan A and plan B theory that critics suppose we hold. Dispensationalists have always taught that there is a single plan

carried out in stages. That relating to Israel was previously revealed, while that relating to the church was hidden until after the birth of Christ's Body. Verse 8 says it is "the manifold wisdom of God," meaning many-sided wisdom of God. Non-dispensationalist, Dr. Ernest Best, said the following when commenting on Ephesians 3:5: "There is both continuity and discontinuity between the testaments: our passage stressed the discontinuity."⁶ Thus, God's single plan has multiple aspects (dispensations) to it. Both unity and diversity is a part of God's plan. Dispensationalists recognize both God's single plan and that it is worked out in history through various ages, while many like Dr. Gentry too often deny biblical distinctions.

A mystery is a secret that cannot be learned through reason, it must be revealed, as it was to Paul. How else could we learn of something that had not been previously disclosed? This is why dispensationalists, and anyone who understands Paul's statement here, believe that the church age is unique and undisclosed in prior history. The Bible tells me so!

NOT DISCLOSED IN THE OLD TESTAMENT

Paul says of the mystery, "which in other generations was not made known to the sons of men, as it has now been revealed to His holy apostles and prophets in the Spirit" (3:5). Dr. Gentry thinks that this verse does not mean what it actually says. "Paul says that the 'mystery' that was kept secret is 'now made manifest' to 'all nation,' not just to Israel," declares Dr. Gentry. "The Church is no 'parenthesis.'"⁷ He takes the "as" in verse 5 as a comparison of *degree*, rather than as a comparison of *kind*, which is what the text intends. It is through such trickery that many, like Dr. Gentry, attempt to get around the clear implication that the church is unique in the plan of God. However, such an approach will not stand up to what the text actually says.

Dr. Hoehner provides five reasons why the "as" is used in this context as a comparison of kind. First, even though "as" is commonly used as a comparison of degree, it is also used a number of times as a comparison of kind. Hoehner notes, "One must consider the context rather than frequency of use to determine the interpretation of any given passage."⁸ "Although the causal use is possible, the descriptive use best fits the context."⁹ Dr. Hoehner calls the comparison of degree the descriptive view.

Second, "The context would support the descriptive sense, for Paul wrote in verse 9 that this mystery was hidden for ages in God." Third, "the verb in verse 5 means 'to uncover, unveil' something that has previous been completely covered or hidden. There is no indication of a partial uncovering of the mystery in the OT. If, then, it was hidden from view, it could only be made known after it was unveiled."¹⁰ Fourth, "The parallel passage in Col. 1:26 does not use the adverbial conjunction *as* but rather the adversative conjunction *but* and reads, 'the mystery which has been hidden for ages and for generations but now was made manifest to his saints.'" This corresponds with Rom. 16:25-26 where Paul states that the mystery was kept secret for ages *but* now has been manifested."¹¹

Finally, "The emphatic position of the temporal adverb 'now,' agrees with Col. 1:26 and Rom. 16:26 in the use and position of the same temporal adverb which marks the contrast between the past and present ages. The same temporal adverb in Eph. 3:10 further substantiates this: 'In order that the manifold wisdom of God (which is the mystery of Jews and Gentiles united in one body) might *now* be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly places through the church.' If the heavenly hosts in OT times did not know of this mystery, it is most unlikely that the people of that era would have known about it. In fact, the heavenly hosts learned of the mystery through

the church (which was formed after the death of Christ, 2:11-22)."¹² Dr. Hoehner says in conclusion: "it seems best to interpret the adverbial conjunction 'as' as descriptive. Accordingly, the mystery that was known to no one before the NT era is now revealed to his holy apostles and prophets."¹³

CONCLUSION

We have seen from Ephesians 3 that Paul teaches that the church age is a unique phase in God's master plan, contrary to Dr. Gentry's claims. This Pauline revealed mystery concerning the Body of Christ does support the notion that the church is a parenthesis in God's plan. Not an afterthought, but a temporary intercalation in God's program for Israel! In concert with Paul's mystery, James said in Acts 15:14-16 that God is "taking from among the Gentiles a people for His name" (verse 14), then He will return and restore Israel (verse 16). Coupled with Paul's teaching in Ephesians 2 and 3, we know that those elect Gentiles of this church age are combined in a co-equal way with the Jewish remnant of the same period. When God's purpose for the church is complete He will end this temporary age with the rapture before the tribulation. Then He will work through Israel to bring her into the bond of the covenant and then all redeemed peoples of the ages will reign in their own order with Messiah in the millennial kingdom. Maranatha!

ENDNOTES

¹ Kenneth Gentry, "Dispensational Distortions," a tape series with no date or place.

² John F. Walvoord, *The Rapture Question* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1957), pp. 23-24.

³ Gentry, "Dispensational Distortions"

⁴ John Witmer, s. v. "Mystery" in Don Campbell, Wendell Johnston, John Walvoord, and John Witmer, *The Theological Wordbook: The 200 Most Important Theological Terms and Their Relevance for Today* (Nashville: Word, 2000), p. 250.

⁵ Harold W. Hoehner, *Ephesians: An Exegetical Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2002), pp. 433-34. For an excellent in-depth treatment of "mystery" see Hoehner's "Excursus 6, Mystery" in his commentary, pp. 428-34.

⁶ Ernest Best, *The International Critical Commentary, Ephesians* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1998), p. 306.

⁷ Kenneth L. Gentry, Jr., *He Shall Have Dominion: A Postmillennial Eschatology* (Tyler, TX: 1992), p. 171.

⁸ Hoehner, *Ephesians*, p. 439, f.n. 4.

⁹ Hoehner, *Ephesians*, p.440.

¹⁰ Hoehner, *Ephesians*, p.440.

¹¹ Hoehner, *Ephesians*, p.440.

¹² Hoehner, *Ephesians*, p.440.

¹³ Hoehner, *Ephesians*, p.440.