

For this reason I, Paul, the prisoner of Christ Jesus for you Gentiles—if indeed you have heard of the dispensation of the grace of God which was given to me for you, how that by revelation He made known to me the mystery (as I have briefly written already, by which, when you read, you may understand my knowledge in the mystery of Christ), which in other ages was not made known to the sons of men, as it has now been revealed by the Spirit to His holy apostles and prophets: that the Gentiles should be fellow heirs, of the same body, and partakers of His promise in Christ through the gospel, of which I became a minister according to the gift of the grace of God given to me by the effective working of His power.

To me, who am less than the least of all the saints, this grace was given, that I should preach among the Gentiles the unsearchable riches of Christ, and to make all see what is the fellowship of the mystery, which from the beginning of the ages has been hidden in God who created all things through Jesus Christ; to the intent that now the manifold wisdom of God might be made known by the church to the principalities and powers in the heavenly places, according to the eternal purpose which He accomplished in Christ Jesus our Lord, in whom we have boldness and access with confidence through faith in Him. Therefore I ask that you do not lose heart at my tribulations for you, which is your glory.

(Ephesians 3:1–13)

### Introduction

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Previously, we took a bird's eye-view of this passage and concluded that the church is the greatest thing in the world. That was our conclusion because clearly it is Paul's conclusion. Paul interrupts his intended prayer for the church (which he eventually gets to in v. 14) by a passionate reminder to his Gentile readers (in Ephesus and Asia Minor) that he counted it the most inestimable privilege to have been let in on the secret of what God had been doing throughout history: bringing to pass the church, the "one new man" in Christ (2:15). This "mystery" was that of Jew and Gentile being "joint heirs, of the same body, partakers of God's promise in Christ through the gospel" (3:6). Boice summarises what this mystery was: "Jew and Gentile, as well as all other types and conditions of men and women, hold their salvation blessings *jointly* in Christ's church."<sup>1</sup> This is no longer a mystery to Paul; he wants to make sure that it is not a mystery to his readers either. He wants Jewish and Gentile believers to be persuaded of the greatness of the church.

When he was first in Ephesus, Paul was sure to preach the gospel to both Jew and Gentile (Acts 19:10, 17). When he left Ephesus, he reminded the Ephesians elders of his faithful ministry there to Jew and Gentile and exhorted them to do the same (Acts 20:17–21, 26, 28).

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<sup>1</sup> James Montgomery Boice, *Ephesians: An Expository Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1988), 97.

Of course, as any student of Ephesians will note, the theme of this epistle is the doctrine (teaching) concerning the church. That God would devote one of only 27 inspired New Testament books to this teaching indicates how central the church is to Him and therefore how central it should be to you and I. It was to Paul, and it was to one of the most history-shaping theologians after Paul: Augustine of Hippo (in modern Algeria).

Augustine too saw the church as the greatest thing in the world. He was of this conviction that outside of the church, there is no salvation.<sup>2</sup> He held this conviction because

it was to the church that God had given the Scriptures and ensured that their message would be proclaimed in fullness and purity throughout the world...Faith in Christ came by the hearing of the Word of God, and that was possible only in and through the ministry of the church. This is why Augustine said that it was impossible for anyone "to regard God as a merciful Father unless he is prepared to honour the church as his mother."<sup>3</sup>

As we return to this passage, I want to dig further into this theme of the greatness of the church. I want to drive home what Paul is driving home: the centrality of the church in God's plan and purpose, and therefore the central place that the church should have in the life of the Christian.

We will do so under three major headings:

1. The Centrality of the Church
2. The Centrality of the Gospel to the Church
3. The Centrality of the Gospel-Centred Church

We who of the conviction that the church is the greatest thing in the world are on solid biblical and theological ground. I trust that this conviction will grow as you reflect further on this text. If this is not your conviction, may the Spirit of God through the Word of God persuade you today.

## The Centrality of the Church

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There are several ways in which this passage highlights the centrality of the church.

### The Church is Central to History

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First, our text highlights the centrality of the church to history (vv. 8–10). We considered this previously, and so I will not belabour this point, but clearly this is Paul's understanding.

To me, who am less than the least of all the saints, this grace was given, that I should preach among the Gentiles the unsearchable riches of Christ, and to make all see what is the fellowship of the mystery, which from the beginning of the ages has been hidden in God who created all things through Jesus Christ; to the intent that now the manifold wisdom of

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<sup>2</sup> Contrary to the conclusions of some poor students of history, Augustine did not mean this in the same way that the Roman Catholic Church came to believe this.

<sup>3</sup> Gerald Bray, *Augustine on the Christian Life: Transformed by the Power of God* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2015), Kindle edition.

God might be made known by the church to the principalities and powers in the heavenly places.

(Ephesians 3:8–10)

From the beginning of the ages, God has been working in history to bring about the church composed of Jewish and Gentile believers (2:19–22). Paul was graced with this insight. In fact, the revelation of this mystery “necessitated a radical re-thinking of what the Old Testament really meant and how it was fulfilled in Christ.”<sup>4</sup>

Paul says that it has “now” been brought to light, and from then on it has continued to be manifested. All of history revolves around the coming of Jesus Christ into the world to save sinners and to form them into the body of Christ.

Paul further fortifies this idea in v. 11: “according to the eternal purpose which He accomplished in Christ Jesus our Lord.” The church should therefore be central to our own personal history. If it is not, then you are missing out on the point and purpose of life. Your compass needs to be adjusted.

The church is central to biblical hermeneutics. It is not a parenthesis in history; if anything, history is a parenthesis to the church. This is one of the errors of dispensationalism, which was popularised by C. I. Scofield and others. Unfortunately, as well has been shown by the likes of John Gerstner and Keith Mathison, dispensationalism is guilty of not only wrongly dividing the word of truth, but of wrongly dividing the people of God.

If dispensationalism is correct then Ephesians 2 is, at best, a merely temporary truth or, at worst, completely wrong. Dispensationalism demands that the middle wall of partition be re-erected. But this is impossible because it is contrary to the plain teaching of Paul.

World history is church history. In an important way, we must guard against separating the two of these. We should read the news asking, “What will this mean for the church?” We should faithfully consider that God is up to something in every event for the good of His church.

### **The Church is Central to Christian Living**

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Second, vv. 8–10 also highlights that the church is central to Christian living. Paul alludes to this when he speaks of bringing to light before the watching world the glory of the church, as well as making known this glorious truth before a heavenly audience.

We are to live motivated by the reality that we are partakers of “the unsearchable riches of Christ” (v. 8), and included in this treasure chest of blessings is that we are members of the household of God. We are to live like it.

Paul’s passion and prayer is that the church will believe and behave like the church. As we grow in our appreciation for the gospel, and in our affection for it, we will live like it. And this will further empower us so that “all” will “see what is the fellowship of the mystery.” One

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<sup>4</sup> Simon Austen, *Teaching Ephesians: From Text to Message* (Ross-shire: Christian Focus 2012), 105.

huge consequence of this is reconciled people and peoples—a holy harmony that redounds to the glory of God alone.

Oh that our church would be like this! Oh that Christian marriages, families and relationships would exemplify this—even among diverse demographics. Oh that Christians would exemplify love and grace and mercy and forgiveness and hope and confidence and faith and holiness.

But we must not be naïve; we must beware of a form of the prosperity gospel. What I mean is that the church that is gospel-centred will also be the target of the enemy. This was Paul's experience in Ephesus (Acts 19:23–41). But, as Paul concludes in v. 13 of our text, this should not deter us from our devotion to Christ, His gospel or His church.

### **The Church is Central to Prayer**

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Third, Paul teaches us that the church is central to prayer (vv. 12–13, 14ff). He speaks of Christ "in whom we have boldness and access with confidence through faith in Him. Therefore I ask that you do not lose heart at my tribulations for you, which is your glory" (vv. 12–13). He then goes on in vv. 14ff to pray for the Ephesians.

As a church we have access to God together. So, as we live out our history, we are to do so confidently, boldly. And this expressed in our prayer life.

Gentiles, through Jesus Christ, are no longer separated from the holy of holies. So don't neglect this privilege. Be glad that we can go to the house of the Lord anytime!

### **The Church is Central to Suffering**

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Next, in v. 13, we learn that the church is central to suffering: "Therefore I ask that you do not lose heart at my tribulations for you, which is your glory."

Paul was literally incarcerated for their sakes (Acts 21–22; 23ff). He was incarcerated because he preached a gospel that was without distinction. He was incarcerated, as this passage indicates, because of his passion for the church of God.

It was this exaltation in the love of God for himself and for the nations that empowered Paul to actually rejoice in his sufferings. He was willing to suffer, and to suffer loss, for the sake of the Gentiles being saved. Their ultimate good—that is, their "glory"—was Paul's priority. And this was inseparable from his missional priority for the church to be all that God intends for her to be. He was willing to suffer for the church's glory (see Colossians 1:24).

We can summarise that Paul's commitment to the gospel and to the church invited suffering. And it was worth it.

There are still those who suffer at home because they prioritise the church. There are wives who have unsupportive husbands, yet who prioritise the gospel and the church anyway. There are husbands and children in the same situation.

There are others who sacrifice comforts for the gospel and the church. Again, it is worth it.

In fact, we should interpret our own sufferings in this way. Paul no doubt did so as he considered his life before Christ. God was preparing him for this. Don't waste your suffering!

### **The Church is Central to Missions**

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Fifth, Paul emphasises throughout vv. 1–13—and we will discuss some of this below—that the church is central to missions. The church is what we aim to see built up by the proclamation of the gospel.

Church planting and church prospering is always our goal. This focus helps us to justify the cost of investing our monies and our members. We should consider that those of another dimension—the angelic beings—are observing how we shape history. Let us praise God and shame on the devil!

All of the above is profoundly true. But most fundamentally, and most inseparably true, is the fact that the church of God is central to the gospel. And this is where we will spend the majority of our attention.

### **The Centrality of the Gospel to the Church**

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The church and the gospel are inseparable. The gospel creates the church and the church stewards the gospel. Paul tells us this in vv. 1–8:

For this reason I, Paul, the prisoner of Christ Jesus for you Gentiles—if indeed you have heard of the dispensation of the grace of God which was given to me for you, how that by revelation He made known to me the mystery (as I have briefly written already, by which, when you read, you may understand my knowledge in the mystery of Christ), which in other ages was not made known to the sons of men, as it has now been revealed by the Spirit to His holy apostles and prophets: that the Gentiles should be fellow heirs, of the same body, and partakers of His promise in Christ through the gospel, of which I became a minister according to the gift of the grace of God given to me by the effective working of His power.

To me, who am less than the least of all the saints, this grace was given, that I should preach among the Gentiles the unsearchable riches of Christ.

(Ephesians 3:1–8)

Note how Paul uses “mystery” and “revelation” and (God’s) “grace” almost interchangeably as he speaks of both the church and the gospel.

If we will prioritise the church (in the way which God expects) then we must prioritise the gospel. And vice versa. The church is central to the gospel and it must remain so. Conversely, the gospel is central to the church, and it must remain so.

It must be noted that the kind of church we are talking about is the true church of God. There are two things that characterise such a church.

### **The Church Exists by the Gospel**

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First, the church exists *by* the gospel.

### **The Church is Formed by the Gospel**

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The church is a “mystery” precisely because it is formed by the gospel (1 Corinthians 2:7, 4:1; Ephesians 1:9; 5:32; 6:19; 1 Timothy 3:9, 16).

If there was no gospel there would be no church. “The full gospel concerns both Christ and the ‘mystery of Christ.’ The good news of the unsearchable riches of Christ, which Paul preached, is that he died and rose again not only to save sinners like me (though he did), but also to create a single new humanity.”<sup>5</sup>

We need to keep before us that the church, the greatest thing in the world, is God’s creation and that He creates it through the word of truth, the gospel (1:13). The church, like the garden in Genesis, is God’s creation, His formation. Similarly, it exists by His Word (James 1:17–18; etc.).

The gospel gives birth to this greatest thing in the world. Therefore, the church is central to the gospel. Real church growth is gospel-produced.

### **The Church is Informed by the Gospel**

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Once formed by the gospel, the church must continue to be informed by the gospel.

To a church already formed by the gospel, Paul wrote, “So, as much as is in me, I am ready to preach the gospel to you who are in Rome also. For I am not ashamed of the gospel of Christ, for it is the power of God to salvation for everyone who believes, for the Jew first and also for the Greek” (Romans 1:15–16).

Jesus intends to save His people fully from their sins (Matthew 1:21), and He does so by the gospel. We need to hear the gospel continually if we will live like the church.

### **The Church is Transformed by the Gospel**

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The initial formation of the church, and the subsequent information to the church concerning the gospel of Christ (and consequently the Christ of the gospel), results in ongoing transformation of the church (vv. 9–11).

God intends that the more we are exposed to the gospel, the more we will be shaped by it. In a word, the gospel aims to transform us to look like Jesus (2 Corinthians 3:18). He humbles us by grace so that we are gracious and merciful and forgiving and peaceable and self-controlled and meek and faithful and joyful and patient and gentle and good.

### **The Church is Reformed by the Gospel**

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We talk a lot at BBC about reformation and about reforming. These are important concepts.

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<sup>5</sup> John R. W. Stott, *The Message of Ephesians: The Bible Speaks Today* (Nottingham: Inter-Varsity Press, 1979), 128–29.

The idea of being “reformed” should mean more than a particular doctrinal persuasion and position. Rather, the church should always be open to being reformed in accordance to God’s Word.

Reformation implies deformation. We are always working against the unravelling process, and so the church must constantly sit under the gospel to be reminded of how we are to live, who and how we are love, and to whom we are to look.

The church that fails to constantly remind itself of the gospel will never be reformed. On the other hand, when we reflect on the gospel, then reformation by the gospel can be expected. I can testify to that personally: My own reformation began years ago when I read Walter Chantry’s *Today’s Gospel: Synthetic or Authentic?* A solid understanding of the gospel led to further reformation in my life and doctrine.

It should be noted that the issues of ethnic division and even ethnic animosities can only be overcome in the church and by the church through a commitment to the gospel. The gospel reforms our sinful prejudices by transforming our attitudes.

In sum, the gospel must be central to the church. That is, the church must be gospel-centred. If it is not, it will not be a God-glorifying mystery to the world. Rather, we will be no different than the rest of our society. And this is nothing less than a tragedy.

### **The Church Exists for the Gospel**

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Having seen that the church exists by the power of the gospel, we now must give attention to a corollary: The church therefore exists for the gospel.

In the first heading, the emphasis was on the power of the gospel in the church. Under this heading, we will note the power of the church on the gospel. While the gospel is responsible for the church, so is the church responsible for the gospel. Again, the relationship between the gospel and the church are inseparable. Just as the gospel is central to the church, so the church is central to the gospel. We will note several ways in which this is true.

### **The Church is the Steward of the Gospel**

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Paul at least once uses the word “stewardship” in our present passage (v. 2) and perhaps twice, depending on the Greek text (v. 9). But it is certainly implied in this passage (vv. 8–10). This idea of being responsible for the gospel is clearly stated in passages such as 1 Corinthians 4:1. But perhaps the best parallel passage is found in 1 Timothy 3:14–16. Here we find the church as being central to the stewardship of the gospel. It is a responsibility we dare not neglect.

The context is the well-grounded (chapter 1) and well-guarded local church (2:1–3:13). The gospel has been entrusted to the apostolic church (1 Timothy 6:20; 2 Timothy 2:1–2; 3:15–4:5). The apostolic church is to faithfully steward this gospel.

The wellbeing of the church is dependent on fidelity to the gospel, and the wellbeing of the gospel is dependent on the fidelity of the church. We are responsible for the greatest message in the world, and to the degree that we are faithful to this, we will be the greatest

thing in the world. There are far too many church across our country, and throughout the world, that are but a shadow of what they once were because they have abandoned fidelity to the gospel.

Practically, we must read the gospel, preach the gospel, sing the gospel, pray the gospel. Our churches must be gospel-saturated. But this demands that we actually *know* the gospel. Do you?

The gospel is the good news of what God has done for believing sinners in the Lord Jesus Christ. It shows us that God is utterly holy and hates sin, that man is utterly sinful and alienated from God, that sin separates us from fellowship and condemns us to eternal punishment, and that Christ came to earth to live, die and rise again in the stead of sinful people so that they might be saved.

### **The Church is to Speak the Gospel**

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Paul understood this that the church must speak the gospel (see v. 8). We guard the gospel by proclaiming it. Like said of the early Christians that they preached the gospel (Acts 11:19). The word here used for “preaching” literally means “to gossip.” There, it wasn't the church leadership formally preaching the gospel, but the church membership sharing Christ as they moved through life.

The gospel is not a museum piece that is to be inaccessibly housed behind glass in order to be preserved. Rather, the more it is handled, the more it is protected. And the church is key to this.

Kevin DeYoung has correctly noted that those who neglect the local church shoot themselves in the foot, their children in the leg, and their grandchildren in the heart. The same holds true if the local church and its members do not constantly speak this message.

### **The Church is to Show the Gospel**

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The church is also to show the gospel. This is made clear by use of the words “revelation” (v. 3), “made known” (vv. 5, 10) and “make all see” (v. 9).

The church is to so faithfully steward the gospel that she will fruitfully display the ramifications of the Christian. We call this Christian living (see above).

I understand that the gospel is news, and it is hard to *show* news. I also understand the folly of the well-worn saying, “Preach the gospel always, and if necessary use words.” But I also understand that the church which faithfully and devotedly stewards the gospel will live very differently than the surrounding world—including its display of relational harmony and just equity and a rejection of ethno-centricity.

When we properly steward the gospel, we will raise our voice and will be able to do so with credibility.

### **The Church is to Send the Gospel**

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The church is also responsible to send the gospel. This church did. In the context of the Ephesian church, Luke tells us that the gospel reached all Asia (Acts 19:10)—and we know from elsewhere in the New Testament that it did not do so through Paul’s missionary efforts.

Faithful stewardship of the gospel requires faithful and sacrificial sending of the gospel. Paul understood this, from the day of his salvific encounter with the Lord Jesus Christ (Acts 9:1–16). He alludes to his conversion and subsequent call as a missionary to the nations in v. 8. He was called to preach the gospel to the Gentiles.

The church that is centred on the gospel is a church that is central to the spread of the gospel. It is impossible for such a church to keep the secret! As we treasure the gospel we will be like the apostles, who could not help but speak the things they had seen and heard. As we grow in our love for the gospel, because of a growing love for the Lord of the gospel, we will overflow with zeal to speak it and to send it to others (vv. 14ff).

Chances are that a church that is not practically committed to sending the gospel will lose the gospel. We will begin to assume it and eventually it will be relegated to a mere appendage of the church. But as we send the gospel we actually are helping ourselves by this practical and prayerful reminder of its importance. Sacrificial sending of the gospel is used by God to enlighten us to what is really important.

This is not an option. If we love our Saviour then we will spread His message as a means to the spread of the fame of his name. As Al Mohler has said, to love Christ is to cherish and love and contend for the gospel. It is also, I would add, to send it.

### **The Centrality of the Gospel-Centred Church**

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Going back to an earlier part of our study, it is not merely *any* church that is central; rather, this privilege is reserved for the gospel-centred church. The gospel-centred church is indeed *central* in this world, and in our individual lives.

If the church remains gospel-centred, it will grow in all the ways in which it should grow. If the gospel-centred church remains gospel-centred, its members will prioritise it. If the church remains gospel-centred, it will remain essentially central, in many ways.

This is one of our biggest problems, at least in South Africa. There are far too many who claim to belong to Christ but at the same time refuse to do His will with reference to the church. This is one reason that many think that BBC is *strange*. I would submit that it is simply *scriptural*.

The gospel-centred church is the only kind of church worthy of the designation “the greatest thing in the world.” I would go so far to say that a church that is not gospel-centred is in fact the *worst* thing in the world. As I heard John MacArthur once say, the most dangerous place to be on any given Sunday is in a church. Not because that church faces some form of militant attack, but because it preaches lies.

Christian, as we grow in our love for Christ, we will grow in our love for what He loves: His body, the church. And we will help others to do so as well.

## The Gospel-Centred Church

Ephesians 3:1–13

Doug Van Meter

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I recently attended the wedding of a church member. I had never met her bridesmaid, but as the bridesmaid gave a speech at the wedding, she told of how our church member had not only led her to the Lord, but had taught her to live the church. This church member is one who very obviously loves the church, and evidently she is eager to help others do the same.

Yes, the church is the greatest thing in the world because it has been formed by the greatest message in the world. The rest of the world needs to know this. Let's do the greatest task in the world by preaching this gospel in all of the world.

AMEN