

Good evening, folks, thanks for joining me again to open God's Word together. This evening, it is my pleasure to continue in our study of the nature and practice of the Church. In our first week, we explored the Majesty of the Church, and saw that it flows out of the majesty of God Himself, through His calling, election, and glorification of us, His Church. We are deemed valuable because we are valuable in His sight and in His plan...there is nothing particularly commendable in us. Then, last week, we looked at the Master of the Church; both His identity (Jesus) as well as His unique qualifications for the position of Head and Chief Shepherd of the Church. We saw that He was and is qualified to lead His church by virtue of His ownership, authorship, ancestry, ability, and affection toward the Church.

This week, we will be examining a lesser known aspect of the Church and its nature...the fact that the entire Church Age was a mystery prior to the coming of Christ. The entire span of time between Jesus' resurrection and present day was fundamentally unknown and unrecognized by the Old Testament saints. Jews, in Old Testament times, believed that only they were chosen by God to be in a covenantal relationship with Him, and that this relationship was based upon an adherence to His Law. Messiah was to come to rescue His people from gentile oppression and control and set up an earthly kingdom under His rule. God's kingdom was to be set up where the Jews, as God's chosen people, would enjoy a favored status under their king. There was little to no thought that the Jewish reliance on Law was to be overturned and that their Messiah was to serve as a final sacrifice for their sins. Theirs was to be a conquering Messiah, not a suffering One.

Look at how difficult it was for even Jesus' disciples to grasp that truth. In the upper room, hours before Jesus arrest and death, the disciples were arguing about who would be greatest in this "kingdom" over which Jesus would reign. Peter, in the garden, sought to prevent Jesus arrest, still not knowing that Jesus came, at this moment, under the sovereign will of His Father, to die to provide for the redemption of mankind... not to establish His reign over them. After His death, the disciples remained confused and despondent. Looking at the empty tomb, they could only imagine that the body of their Lord had been stolen...a final indignity to add to His death. In describing this scene, John simply writes, in [John 20:9,10](#) "For as yet they did not understand the Scripture, that He must rise again from the dead. So the disciples went away again to their own homes." Beloved, imagine with me, if you would, this moment in history. The disciples have spent three years with Jesus, in His presence, under His teaching. They have come to an understanding that He is God Himself, speaking words of eternal life. They have put all their hopes on Him as their Messiah...He who comes to rule and restore His people. He is to usher in God's justice, punishing the wicked and upholding the righteous. He is to abolish the hypocrisy and oppression of the religious systems that are obviously and ultimately unsatisfying and corrupt. And these systems...the Roman rulers and the religious hierarchies...the very systems that they thought Jesus had come to tear down...have been the instruments, instead, of His execution. Coming to His gravesite to honor His memory and grieve their loss, they find, what appears to be, His grave ransacked and His body taken away. Reeling in anger, confusion, and heartache, heads and hearts brought low, they set out on their wearisome journey home, leaving Mary Magdalene, outside the tomb, weeping.

This was the state of the disciple's hearts in that moment... all their expectations dashed and all their hopes scattered. It was only after Jesus appeared to them on several occasions after His

resurrection that they began to understand this “mystery”, and even then, it was an imperfect understanding. The disciples remained confused and fearful. What happened to the kingdom?! What are we to do now?! Jesus had told them to go into Galilee and wait for Him, (which they did) but wait for what?! Do you recall the scene in [John 21:2](#) where Peter says “I am going fishing”? This is not Peter saying, “Guys, let’s go catch some breakfast”. It is Peter saying, “Guys, I can’t do this anymore...I can’t sit here and wait anymore. I am going back to doing what I know how to do...fish!” We won’t take the time to unpack the events that followed, but it is a marvelous account of Jesus love for, and restoration of, Peter. Skipping ahead in the story, in Acts 1, we see how Jesus unfolds to the disciples the Mystery of the Church.

“The first account I composed, Theophilus, about all that Jesus began to do and teach, 2 until the day when He was taken up *to heaven*, after He had by the Holy Spirit given orders to the apostles whom He had chosen. To these, He also presented Himself alive after His suffering, by many convincing proofs, appearing to them over *a period of forty days* and speaking of the things concerning the kingdom of God. Gathering them together, He commanded them not to leave Jerusalem, but to wait for what the Father had promised, “Which,” *He said*, “you heard of from Me; 5 for John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit not many days from now.”6 So when they had come together, they were asking Him, saying, “Lord, is it at this time You are restoring the kingdom to Israel?” 7 He said to them, “It is not for you to know times or epochs which the Father has fixed by His own authority; 8 but you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you shall be My witnesses both in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and even to the remotest part of the earth.”

In essence, He says to them, “Now is not the time for the restoration of My physical kingdom...a kingdom of this world..., now is the time for building a spiritual kingdom...a kingdom where, to quote Jeremiah, “I will put My law within them and on their heart I will write it; and I will be their God, and they shall be My people”. It is a time for building this “new thing”... this thing which has been a mystery...It is a time for building His Church. Now, finally, Peter has an understanding of what he was told to wait for...to be a witness “both in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and even to the remotest part of the earth.” This is no different than the final words of Jesus recorded by Matthew in Matt 28;19ff., “Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age.” Here, too, the disciples receive their commission...what will become their life’s work; their life’s purpose. And, beloved, we too share in that work and purpose...in the privilege of building the Church. As we have seen in past weeks, God seeks to transform us into the image of His Son...to be His hands and feet in bringing His gospel to a hopeless and fallen world. He would use us to bring people into His spiritual kingdom...the Church...so that they also have a place in His eternal kingdom, enjoying everlasting life and fellowship with Him.

So, have we now plumbed the depths of the “mystery” of the Church? Not quite. Equally unknown...of equal “mystery”... was the idea that God’s plan and kingdom was to include the gentiles! Non-Jews...gentiles...were, as Paul writes in [Eph 2:12](#), “excluded from the commonwealth of Israel, and strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world”. While the Jews allowed gentiles to convert to Judaism and enjoy some of the benefits of following the God of Israel, the idea that the gentiles could have access to God apart

from that conversion was unheard of. In the same fashion that the mystery of the church...of a spiritual kingdom residing in the hearts of God's people...resulted in confusion for those expecting an earthly kingdom so, too, did the idea that gentiles were to be included in that kingdom as "fellow heirs and fellow members of the body, and fellow partakers of the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel" result in confusion.

Jews had little association with gentiles; they were considered unclean and inferior, presenting a danger in their practices and beliefs. They were forbidden to intermarry with gentiles or be in close association with them. Jews were forbidden to enter a gentile's home, or eat with them, for fear of contaminating themselves. They would not patronize a gentile butcher or baker for the same reasons. So ingrained was this idea of gentile "uncleanness" that Jews would, after travelling in gentile territory, literally shake the dust off their clothing so as not to contaminate Jewish soil. This, of course, led to ongoing animosity and hatred on both sides...Jew for gentile and gentile for Jew.

Paul acknowledges that animosity...that enmity...in [Eph 2:13ff](#) where he writes, "But now in Christ Jesus you who formerly were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ. For He Himself is our peace, who made both groups into one and broke down the barrier of the dividing wall, by abolishing in His flesh the enmity, which is the Law of commandments contained in ordinances, so that in Himself He might make the two into one new man, thus establishing peace". Paul is so astonished and captivated by this "mystery" that he repeats himself in the next chapter. As he is getting ready to pray for them...the very prayer that we spent several weeks studying... he cannot help but stop, and revisit this amazing truth. In [Col 3:10ff](#), Paul is even more specific, where he says they "have put on the new self who is being renewed to a true knowledge according to the image of the One who created him—in which there is no distinction between Greek and Jew, circumcised and uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave and freeman, but Christ is all, and in all.

Beloved, this is of critical importance! Our differences...our disparities...our distinctions...are not the dominant and controlling truths in our lives as many would have us think. In fact that thinking is in opposition to "true knowledge according to the image of the One who created" us. In his letter to the Colossians, Paul makes it clear that we do not find our identity in our distinctions; our ethnicity, or our economic and social status, or our position of power or "victimhood", or our religious observances. We find our identity in Christ, the one who "is all, and in all". And our reconciliation with each other is found in that same place...in Christ.

Our problems begin when we cling to those distinctions instead of embracing our unity in Christ. We have many voices in our society...and in the Church... insisting that our differences rightly, and necessarily, divide us. Only when those who have somehow benefited from a perceived historical imbalance of power, repent of this proclaimed "systemic sin", can there be some sort of reconciliation. This stands in opposition to the simple truths that we have just read...that our reconciliation is already an established fact in Christ. Christians today are guilty of embracing this sinful thinking just as they did 2000 years ago. Our old nature wants to cling to old distinctions...so that we can feel better about ourselves at the expense of those we consider less valuable...or less enlightened...or less spiritual...or less refined...or less prosperous. Paul had to address this in his first words when writing to the church at Corinth. In [1 Cor 1:10](#) he says,

“Now I exhort you, brethren, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that you all agree and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be made complete in the same mind and in the same judgment. For I have been informed concerning you, my brethren, by Chloe’s people that there are quarrels among you. Now I mean this, that each one of you is saying, “I am of Paul,” and “I of Apollos,” and “I of Cephas,” and “I of Christ.”

And James deals with a similar problem. In [James 2:1](#) he writes, “My brethren, do not hold your faith in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ with an attitude of personal favoritism. For if a man comes into your assembly with a gold ring and dressed in fine clothes, and there also comes in a poor man in dirty clothes, and you pay special attention to the one who is wearing the fine clothes, and say, “You sit here in a good place,” and you say to the poor man, “You stand over there, or sit down by my footstool,” have you not made distinctions among yourselves, and become judges with evil motives?

Beloved, we learn from our study of the mystery of the Church, that it is a mystery within a mystery. And for most of us, we live in the light of both. We live in the Church age, and we have entered into relationship with God as Gentiles... grafted in... fellow heirs and fellow members of the body, and fellow partakers of the promise in Christ Jesus. The dividing lines of distinction have been abolished, bringing us to reconciliation with God and with each other. Let us live in the reality of these truths. Let us pray.