

My goal is that their hearts would be encouraged and united together in love so that they might have all the riches of assurance that come with understanding, so that they might have the knowledge of the secret plan of God, namely Christ.

—Colossians 2:2

In the New Testament, a “mystery” does not mean something which must be kept secret except for the initiated. It signifies something which could not be known except by divine revelation but which, though once hidden, is now revealed in Christ—God’s plan to offer salvation to the Gentiles through his Messiah, or as Paul puts it, “Christ among you [Gentiles], the hope of glory” (1:27).

—Archibald M. Hunter, *The Layman’s Bible Commentary*

LEARNING GOALS

1. To get a glimpse into how Paul saw his role in the mission of God.
2. To consider briefly the elements of the Colossian Heresy and how they impede the mission of God.
3. To discuss Paul’s characteristics of a healthy church community and how they fit into our story.

REFLECTION

Paul’s Role in the Mission of God

To all must be offered an opportunity to hear the gospel. The Jews have already had it; “but not all have received the gospel,” and therefore the call now goes

to the Gentiles before finally, at the end, the Jews do enter. Thus the word of the gospel, which must first be preached to the Gentiles, has for Paul a particularly concrete meaning, in which the chief emphasis now lies upon the word "Gentiles." But here again the character of the missionary preaching, as determined by the redemptive history and as a sign of the end, is clear. It is only that Paul, as an instrument of this plan, views this sign first of all from the standpoint of his own apostolic obligation.

When we remember that Paul knows himself to be given a place in a plan on whose execution God made the coming of his Kingdom dependent, then we also understand better the "compulsion" (I Corinthians 9:16) to which he knows that he is subjected; he is a "debtor" in relation to "Greeks and Barbarians" (Romans 1:14). He regards himself as a "prisoner of Christ for the Gentiles" (Ephesians 3:1). "Woe to me if I preach not the gospel" (I Corinthians 9:16).

—Oscar Culmann, *Christ and Time*

Here Paul sets out the very essence of the task which has been given to him by God. That task was to bring to men a new discovery, a secret kept throughout the ages and the generations and now revealed. That discovery and that secret were that the glory of the hope of the gospel was not only for the Jews, but was for all men everywhere. He destroyed forever the idea that God and the love and the mercy of God were the property of any one people and of any one nation.

—William Barclay

The Colossian Heresy

In its practical consequences for daily life, Gnosticism was usually associated with a strict asceticism. This tendency appears as early as the incipient Gnosticism attacked in the Epistle to the Colossians, where the tendency of this teaching is summarized in the words, "Touch not, taste not, handle not."

The influence of Gnosticism was less desirable, however, in that it led to the excessive intellectualizing of Christian faith. Faith henceforth comes to denote intellectual orthodoxy rather than personal commitment to Christ."

—F.F. Bruce, *The Spreading Flame*

[The Colossian Heresy] attacked the total adequacy and the unique supremacy of Christ. No Pauline letter has such a lofty view of Jesus Christ, and such an insistence on His completeness and His finality:

- Image of the invisible God; in Him all fullness dwells (1:15, 19)
- In Him are hid all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge (2:2)
- In Him dwells the fullness of the Godhead in bodily form (2:9)

We must also note that Paul goes out of his way to stress the part that Jesus Christ played in creation, the creating work of the Son:

- In His body of flesh He did His redeeming work (1:22)
- The fullness of the Godhead dwells in Him in bodily form (2:9)

There seems to have been an astrological element in this heresy (2:8, 20). ... This heresy made much of the powers of demonic spirits (1:16; 2:10, 15). ... There was clearly what we might call a philosophical element in this heresy (2:8). ... There was a tendency in this heresy to insist on the observance of special days and rituals (2:16). ... Clearly there was a would-be ascetic element in this heresy (2:16, 21). ... Equally this heresy had at least sometimes an antinomian streak in it (3:5–8). ... Apparently this heresy gave at least some place to the worship of angels (2:18). ... Lastly, there seems to have been in this heresy something which can only be called spiritual and intellectual snobbery (1:28).

—William Barclay, *The Letters to the Philippians, Colossians, and Thessalonians*

Participating in God's Mission Together

A vivid imagination compels the whole body to obey it.

—David L. Cooperrider and Diana Whitney, *Appreciative Inquiry*

Paul's marks of a living and faithful Church:

- Courageous hearts
- Members are knit together in love
- Equipped with wisdom (and all of this wisdom is hidden in Christ)
- Power to resist seductive teaching
- Has a soldier's discipline
- Lives in Christ
- Holds fast to the faith which it has received
- Has an abounding and overflowing gratitude

LESSON PLAN

(Note: Spend most of the class time on the Involve and Challenge questions below. As Peter Block says, "Questions are more transformative than answers and are the essential tools of engagement.")

1. Engage

- a. "Many citizens get engaged in community only when they are angry." — Peter Block
- b. Consider Paul's marks of a faithful church.

2. Involve

Note: These questions are designed, hopefully, to recall great moments in our story, draw on our strengths and create a vision for our future.

- a. What brings you into this fellowship?
- b. When you consider the history of our church community, what makes you grateful?
- c. In light of Paul's list, what do you appreciate about the Glenwood story?
- d. What items on the list have been prominent in the history of the Glenwood Church?
- e. Of Paul's list, what do you want more of?

3. Challenge

- a. "I used to be afraid of failing at something that really mattered to me, but now I'm more afraid of succeeding at things that don't matter." —Bob Goff, *Love Does*
- b. What can we create together that we cannot create alone?
- c. How valuable do you plan for this effort to be?
- d. To what extent are you invested in the well-being of this community?
- e. Imagine Glenwood ten years from now. Everything is just as God would have it to be.
 - i. What would be different?
 - ii. How have you contributed to this future?

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