



Temple Baptist Church
Wilmington, North Carolina
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The Mystery of Togetherness
Ephesians 3:1-12

Yesterday, January 6, was the Day of Epiphany. Though Epiphany doesn't receive as much attention as Christmas, the early church actually celebrated Epiphany long before it began to celebrate Christmas, linking it to the visit of the Magi to the Christ child Jesus that we read about from Matthew 2:1-12 earlier in today's service. In fact, to this day the Eastern Orthodox Churches celebrate Jesus' birth at Epiphany rather than on December 25.

Now the significance of Epiphany is to celebrate how Christ came as the light of the world—not only as the Jewish Messiah, but as the Savior of the world, the Lord of all nations. The early church saw this truth powerfully portrayed in the visit of the Magi.

So today, we focus on Epiphany, looking at a text, Ephesians 3:1-12,¹ that teaches us about an important Epiphany theme, "The Mystery of Togetherness." Listen to what Paul wrote . . .
Read text . . .

Some context . . .

To get a fuller picture of what Paul was saying here, we need to put it in the context of the letter as a whole.

Following the pattern of an ancient letter, Paul begins with his greeting. After a doxology that praises God for His glorious grace that He has lavished on us in Jesus Christ according to His eternal redemptive purpose, he prays for God to enlighten the eyes of the hearts of his readers so they can see the greatness of His resurrection power at work in those who have put their faith in Christ. He describes in powerful terms what God has done in Christ to redeem us individually, emphasizing that it's all by God's grace through faith, not by our good works.

Paul then describes our corporate redemption—how God has included us Gentiles in His eternal plan, so that through Christ and His cross and resurrection God has created in Him **one new humanity** (2:15, NRSV), breaking down **the dividing wall of hostility** between Jews and Gentiles (2:14). Now God's temple is Christ's church, **built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets with Christ Jesus himself as the chief cornerstone** (2:20), and it includes believers from every race, with no distinction.

Mystery and ministry

Here Paul turns to tell his readers how he has been entrusted with the special stewardship of preaching to the Gentiles **the unsearchable riches of Christ** (3:8)—a mystery revealed to him through God's grace. It wasn't made known in past generations, but now by His Spirit God has revealed it to His **holy apostles and prophets** (3:1-5).

Now when we think of a mystery, we usually think about something that if you discover enough clues about it, you can figure it out—you know, like a murder mystery.

But in the New Testament, a mystery is something we *can't* discover. It has to be *revealed* to us by God. Paul says that in previous generations, God had *not* revealed this mystery, this plan for the ages. But now *He has*.

And what is the mystery? **[T]hat through the gospel the Gentiles are heirs together with Israel, members together of one body, and sharers together in the promise in Christ Jesus (3:6). Together—both Jews and Gentiles in Christ.**

What Paul is saying here was in many ways very radical. There were still at this point some in the church who firmly believed that to share in God's salvation, a Gentile had to become a Jew in order to become a Christian, despite the ruling of the Jerusalem Council of the apostles and elders we read about in Acts 15. James, the Lord's brother and leader of the church in Jerusalem saw the inclusion of the Gentiles as the fulfillment of Amos 9:11-12. The apostles and elders agreed and sent a letter to the Gentile believers stating:

It seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us not to burden you with anything beyond the following requirements: You are to abstain from food sacrificed to idols, from the meat of strangled animals and from sexual immorality. You will do well to avoid these things.

Nevertheless, the separation between Jews and Gentiles was still very firm in a lot of ways in the minds of many.

But Paul declares that by God's grace, he was called to preach **the unsearchable riches of Christ to the Gentiles (3:7-9)**. And he further declares that God's intent in how He was doing things was to show His manifold wisdom **to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly realms, according to his eternal purpose which he accomplished in Christ Jesus our Lord—through this church that's made up of both Jews and Gentiles (3:10-11)!**

Now, as a result of all this, Paul says, in Christ *all* believers (both Jewish and Gentile) have access in Him through His faithfulness (**the faith of him, KJV**) to approach God **with freedom and confidence (3:12)**.

So through all this, *Paul told his readers how God revealed His purpose to include the Gentiles in His redemptive plan*. And in his ministry and mission to the Gentiles, Paul was a steward of this mystery.

Living the mystery

So what does all this mean for us as followers of Jesus today?

As we think today about Epiphany, this text reminds us of the *mystery of togetherness*—how God has worked in Christ to bring us *together* in Him, to save men and women from all nations as a people for Himself.

You see, the significance of the visit of the Magi that we remember at Epiphany was that the wise men of the nations were coming to worship the Messiah of Israel!

About this time in history, the Jews were expecting a Messiah, and *the world* was looking for a mighty king to arise. Even the Roman historians Suetonius and Tacitus noted a widespread belief, especially in the East, that a mighty ruler was to arise from Judea.²

When the Magi (probably Zoroastrian priests of Persia), these scholars who were careful watchers of the night sky, saw this new star, they believed it was the sign in the heavens that this mighty king had been born. So they set out to see Him and pay Him homage, foreshadowing in a very powerful way what Paul talks about in this passage in Ephesians—how Christ was revealed

to the Gentiles, and how many Gentiles came to have faith in Him. In his Gospel account Matthew includes in Jesus' genealogy Gentile women who trusted in the LORD God of Israel (Rahab of Jericho and Ruth of Moab; Matthew 1:5); he tells of the Magi's visit, and ends his account with Jesus' commission to **go and make disciples of all nations** (Matthew 28:19)!

The point of it all is simply this: *In Christ, God is bringing all nations together in one body as heirs of God's redemptive promises.*

When you think about it, this truth has a multitude of implications. Briefly consider three of them . . .

First, *if this truth were not so, then most of us would be left out of God's redemptive purpose!*

Most, if not all, of us in this sanctuary today are *Gentiles*. If God hadn't included *all nations*, making Gentiles **fellow heirs and fellow members of the body, and fellow partakers of the promise in Christ Jesus** (3:6, NASB), we'd be lost and we'd have no opportunity for salvation! So thank God for this *mystery of togetherness!*

I remember seeing this mystery illustrated so beautifully many years ago in the church we were then serving. It was a Christmas party for the folks involved in our Hispanic Ministry. Our ESL teachers and other workers, Edgar (the Hispanic lay minister who led the Spanish Bible study and worship time after ESL), his family, a few Hispanic students, a local Muslim family of Palestinian descent, and my family and I were there.

After supper, Edgar broke out his guitar. We sang "Feliz Navidad," and a few Christmas carols. Edgar sang some worship songs in Spanish. Trying to get some other folks to do something, he finally asked his nine-year-old daughter, Priscilla, to read a little book about Mary and the baby Jesus. She asked if she and her two friends, Amanda and Fayda, also nine, could read it together, taking turns. There they stood, three little girls—one Hispanic, one Caucasian, one Arab—reading a book about the baby Jesus, powerfully portraying how Christ calls *all the nations* to Himself!

And then consider this: *God's revelation of this mystery of togetherness is a call to mission.*

As we begin this year of our Lord 2018, the Christian mission has made tremendous advances, particularly in the last seventy-five years. There are more Christians on earth today than ever before, and God is doing some amazing things around the world.

But there are still so many who have never heard the gospel! Supporting missions with our prayers, gifts, and personal involvement is crucial to our church's mission and vision *to know Christ, and to make Him known.*

But we also have to realize that the world has come to Wilmington! We don't have to go very far from our church's doorstep to reach out to people of all nations. The 2010 U.S. Census identified at least *six races or ethnicities* of people living inside our city limits!³ And 6.3 percent of people living in Wilmington in 2010 were foreign born—*nearly 7,100 individuals.*⁴ Now, eight years later, there may well be even more. According to a 2015 demographic study provided to our church, *thirteen foreign languages* are spoken in the home within a one-and-a-half mile radius of this sanctuary!⁵

Some of these people are Christians, many aren't. But God has bought the nations *here*, and we have the responsibility to proclaim the gospel to them through deeds of love and words of witness, and to welcome them into the family of God when they believe!

Finally, consider this. *This mystery of togetherness calls us to accept one another in Christ.*

We are heirs together, members together, and sharers together. The key word is *together!* That's the reality in Christ; we must recognize it and put it into practice!

Back in 2016, Anglican minister David Roseberry was leading a group of pilgrims in a renewal of their baptismal vows at the Jordan River at the original site of Jesus' baptism. A man in the group came forward and said, "I want to be baptized; I have never been baptized and I want to be today." After a thorough questioning and his pledging his baptismal vows, the man was immersed in the cold, muddy waters of the Jordan. On the other side of the river, not ten yards away, but standing in the nation of Jordan, a group of nuns from Lebanon and Egypt cheered and began to sing "Amazing Grace." Roseberry's group joined in the singing. He described the scene as

Christians from around the world separated into two countries by a river, but joined together in Christ over that same river as one brother came into the fellowship of our common Lord who had been also baptized in that same river. One man went under the water of baptism and when he emerged, a cloud of witnesses from across the nations and over the world gave thanks to God.⁶

And that's how we are to be—*together* in Christ, welcoming and accepting each other as fellow heirs, fellow members of the body, fellow partakers of the promise, in love and mutual respect.

My beloved brothers and sisters, *in Jesus Christ, God is bringing all nations together in one body as heirs of God's redemptive promises.*

Thanks be to God for this *mystery of togetherness!*

†MEG

¹ Unless otherwise indicated, Scripture taken from the HOLY BIBLE, NEW INTERNATIONAL VERSION® (1984 edition).

² William Barclay, *The Gospel of Matthew, Volume 1 in The Daily Bible Study Series, Revised Edition* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1975), 25-27.

³ <https://factfinder.census.gov/faces/tableservices/jsf/pages/productview.xhtml?src=CF>; accessed 4/20/2017.

⁴ <https://factfinder.census.gov/faces/tableservices/jsf/pages/productview.xhtml?src=CF>; accessed 4/20/2017.

⁵ The FullInsite Report, p. 23.

⁶ "Baptism in the Jordan to the Tune of Amazing Grace"; http://www.patheos.com/blogs/jesuscreed/2016/02/04/baptism-in-the-jordan-to-the-tune-of-amazing-grace/?utm_source=&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=jesuscreed_020416UTC030252_daily&utm_content=&spMailingID=50625192&spUserID=OTgzOTU1MjE5MTYS1&spJobID=860478304&spReportId=ODYwNDc4MzA0S0 (accessed 02/04/2016).