

God's Many-Splendored Wisdom ... in Church?

Thomas Robinson, *Ephesians – Growing Up Into Christ 10*, November 20, 2011

Ephesians 3:7-13

⁷ Of this **gospel** I was made a **minister** (*diakonos*)
according to the **gift of God's grace**,
which was given me by the working of **his power**.
⁸ **To me**, though I am the very **least of all the saints**, this **grace** was given,
to **preach** to the **Gentiles** the untrackable **riches of Christ**,
⁹ and to **bring to light** for everyone what is the **plan of the mystery**
hidden for ages in God who created all things,
¹⁰ so that **now** may be made known
to the **rulers and authorities** in the **heavenly places**,
through the church
the **manifold wisdom of God**,
¹¹ according to the eternal purpose
that he has **realized** (done/made) **in the Messiah Jesus our Lord**,
¹² in whom **we have boldness and access with confidence**
through **his faithfulness**.
¹³ So I ask you not to lose heart over what I am **suffering** for you,
which is your **glory**.

Ephesians 4:7-13

⁷ But grace was given to each one of us according to the measure of the Messiah's gift.
⁸ Therefore it says, "*When he ascended on high he led a host of captives, and he gave gifts to men.*" [Ps 68:18] ⁹ (In saying, "*He ascended,*" what does it mean but that he had also descended into the lower regions, the earth? ¹⁰ He who descended is the one who also ascended far above all the heavens, that he might fill all things.)
¹¹ And he gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the shepherds and teachers,
¹² to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, ¹³ until we all attain to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to mature manhood, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of the Messiah.

Romans 12:3-11

³ For by the grace given to me I say to everyone among you not to think of himself more highly than he ought to think, but to think with sober judgment, each according to the measure of faith that God has assigned.

⁴ For as in one body we have many members, and the members do not all have the same function, ⁵ so we, though many, are one body in Christ, and individually members one of another.

⁶ Having gifts that differ according to the grace given to us, let us use them: if prophecy, in proportion to our faith; ⁷ if service, in our serving; the one who teaches, in his teaching; ⁸ the one who exhorts, in his exhortation; the one who contributes, in generosity; the one who leads, with zeal; the one who does acts of mercy, with cheerfulness.

⁹ Let love be genuine. Abhor what is evil; hold fast to what is good. ¹⁰ Love one another with brotherly affection. Outdo one another in showing honor. ¹¹ Do not be slothful in zeal, be fervent in spirit, serve the Lord.

What is “the Church” Doing Here?

It is a truism of our day that people consider themselves “spiritual” but they distrust “organized religion;” they like Jesus but they don’t like the church. The church with its checkered history and many problems and political compromises and sinful ministers, etc., has often seemed its own worst enemy. These are very serious realities.

That’s what makes v. 10 so striking. In describing how God reveals to authorities in heavenly places his great wisdom and eternal purpose, he inserts that phrase, “*through the church.*” The church, by its existence, has a central role in God’s great purposes in his creation. The statement was no less surprising in Paul’s day that it is today. One might easily imagine “authorities” looking at the church in Corinth or those described in Revelation and thinking that the creator of the universe could surely have done better. So also today.

We are Unworthy! We are Unworthy!

When we think of God’s grace and our sinfulness – “*dead in our transgressions and sins*” – we rightly realize that we have no claim on God and no power to reach God or bring him to our aid. If we look only at ourselves, we’re hopeless. But God’s grace means that we must not look only at ourselves. God considers us worthy of his love; we can’t stay in our guilt.

Paul sees his own individual life within the great purpose of God. He knows his past but even more he sees God’s power and grace. His future life and work must flow not from his weakness but from God’s strength. Think about yourself with sober judgment and faith. Each of us receives gifts by God’s grace to be used to embody God’s love and work in the world. God always works through broken, sinful people (Abraham, David, Moses ...)

Paul doesn’t minimize his gifts out of “humility,” but rather magnifies them because of God. His power is real and works among us. We need to open ourselves to his full impact. Later in Ephesians and in Romans Paul urges every believer to treasure and use the gifts.

What is the Church For?

Paul here is not thinking about all the potential work that members of the church can do. Rather he is looking at its very existence created by the Messiah Jesus, that is, an embodiment of God’s eternal purpose to renew his creation. By being a place where he creates a new humanity, a new way of being human, uniting all kinds of people in one body, it stands over against the values of this world’s authorities.

Paul knows very well that in many churches it was difficult to break down the barriers between Jew and Gentile, slave and free, male and female (Gal 3:28). But the church should at least be moving in that direction. Christians should continually be looking for ways that God’s creation has been distorted by this world’s powers, and challenge them.

The success of God’s purposes in the church does not depend on us. We might think Paul should say the opposite in order to motivate service. God has already realized his great purpose in Jesus (v.11), and it is because of his faithfulness that we can participate at all.

Paul returns to his suffering as a prisoner in chains. He sees it as a sign that he is disturbing the rulers of this world just as the Gospel should, and thus it is part of the glory, the true enlightenment of the nations, that belongs to all the believers. See it for what it is.