

**Sermon File # 869**

**Scripture Text: Ephesians 3:1-13**

**Sermon Title: *The Church in the Purpose of God***

**Manuscript written and sermon preached by Roger Roberts**

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## ***The Church in the Purpose of God***

### **Introduction:**

Open your Bibles with me to Ephesians 3:1-13, as we continue our sermon series from this letter of Paul about our new life in Christ. As we saw last week, the Christian life begins as an individual's encounter with God, who saves us individually by his grace, which must be met with our personal faith response (2:1-10). But the Christian life does not remain individualistic, but rather is drawn into the life of the church, which Paul says is a new society of transformed people, made up of the religious Jews, the insiders, and the pagan Gentiles, the unlikely outsiders. The church is God's building, made up of greatly diverse people who share a common faith commitment to the Lord Jesus Christ (2:11-22).

Today's text is actually one of Paul's digressions in his thought, what has been called also a "parenthetical expansion" (Hoehner, 417). Although our text is an aside in his train of thought, it's nevertheless an important passage, another long sentence containing 189 words. Now that he established that the church is God's building, before he resumes his prayer for the church (3:14-21), which he began in Chapter 1:15-23, Paul has this great parenthetical thought of the church in purpose of God.

Follow as I read: **Ephesians 3:1-13.**

Last Sunday, when we noted from Ephesians 2:11-22 that “This Church Is God’s Building,” the elders led in a special prayer at the close of the service, seeking God’s blessing for the successful transfer of our church property title from the Union of Baptists in Belgium to our church, which is now an established not-for profit entity (vzw) in Belgium. Today we can rejoice that this transaction was done and now, after many years of concern and strife over the issue of ownership, the matter is finally settled. IBC Brussels now legally owns and holds title to its property which it had purchased and has paid for and been maintaining now for over two decades. Again, however, we affirm that this property is the Lord’s and we are grateful stewards of it and dedicate ourselves to use it for his glory as a meeting place for the real church, which is the people, the body of Christ.

Over three decades ago, when I was still a young pastor, I heard a sermon preached by a senior pastor of an influential church, a man whom I had admired as one of my models in the pastoral ministry. Franklin Paschall preached in his pulpit at the First Baptist Church of Nashville, Tennessee, USA, from our text for today and the title of his sermon was “The Church in the Purpose of God.” I don’t recall much else from the sermon, but I do remember that, as a young pastor, I was stirred to become the pastor of a church that served, that carried forth, the purpose of God.

As did this text for that esteemed pastor, so does this text show us today what it means for the church to be in the purpose of God, to fulfill the objectives that God has for the church to be his instrument for carrying out his agenda in the world. This text fits as much for us here at IBC as it did for the First Baptist Church of Nashville. We, who are God’s building, and who now have ownership of our physical property, are in a great position to be a church in the purpose of God, to join God in what he is at work doing in our world. I hope that we as pastor/elder and all people of IBC Brussels will join God in his purpose.

The church in the purpose of God, first of all...

### **Understands the mysterious message of Christ (verses 1-6)**

The older I grow, the more I appreciate the mystery as well as the revelation of God’s truth. The more I experience and the more I study, the more I realize how relatively little I know and stand in awe before the God whose ways are past finding out. Also, I’ve learned to be wary of the Christian who claims to have all the answers, and who leaves no room for mystery and unanswered questions in his or her faith understanding, which seems to me to leave little room for faith!

Although we should retain a sense of the mysterious wonder of God and his working in creation and redemption, we do not remain “in the dark” as to his way of salvation and the message of Christ because it is...

### *A revealed message*

In our text Paul uses the word “mysterion,” mystery, which had a special meaning for Paul. To us, mystery means something hidden and that everyone tries to understand, like the solving of a mystery or a detective novel or movie. If something remains mysterious it is unsolved and perhaps insoluble and remains unknown. But Paul uses this word to describe what had been hidden and now has been made known to all who want to understand, and that is the message of salvation and its being made available, not just to the religious insider, the Jew, but also to the pagan outsider. The mystery of the message of Christ and its availability to all people is not something reserved for an elite few but rather is something that is open and available to all who will believe and are willing to see how God is working in his world (Stott, 116).

As we noted in Paul’s prayer in 1:15-23, God graciously gives to those who respond with openness to his saving message the gift of spiritual insight. Those who are born of the Spirit, have received the new nature, also have “the mind of Christ,” by which we are able to understand spiritual truth (1 Corinthians 2:6-16). The new believer has new insight that before was impossible because apart from grace we cannot see the light of God’s saving truth. Those who reject the saving message of Jesus chose to remain in the dark and are guilty of spiritual blindness (John 9:35-41).

The message of salvation and the forgiveness of sin through Christ’s sacrificial death and resurrection is a mystery that is uncovered for those willing to admit and turn from sin and guilt and trust Christ as Savior and follow him as Lord. This glorious, mysterious message is revealed.

But in our text Paul says the mystery of the message of Christ is in its being...

### *An inclusive message*

*The Message* offers this paraphrase of verse 6:

“The mystery is that people who have never heard of God and those who have heard of him all their lives (what I’ve been calling outsiders and insiders) stand on the same ground before God. They get the same offer, same help, same promises in Christ Jesus. The Message is accessible and welcoming to everyone, across the board.”

To a Jew like Paul, who had been so zealous for the law and traditions of Judaism, this indeed was a mystery, a totally new disclosure (e.g., his testimony in Philippians 3:4-6). God made this mystery known also to another Jewish convert and leader of the church, Simon Peter, through the vision he had of clean and unclean animals as expressive that all, not just all foods are to be considered clean, but all people, Jews and Gentiles like Cornelius, are accepted to God through faith in Christ (Acts 10:1-11:18; Also, Jesus’ words in Mark 7:19). This inclusion that Paul speaks about in our text was indeed an incredible revelation” (Mohrlang, 2002).

This mystery a lot of Jews, called Judaisers, were unable and unwilling to accept, thinking that to become a Christian one had first to become a Jew. But Paul said that such exclusivity was not of the message, the good news of Christ, but in fact was “another gospel,” and anyone who proclaimed such an exclusive lie deserved to be “eternally condemned” (Galatians 1:9). Christ through his death destroyed the law as a barrier of exclusivity and welcomes all “outsiders,” pagans and sinners of doubtful reputation. This seeking after sinners is what earned Jesus the reputation as a friend of outcast sinners, those of sordid, nefarious reputation (Luke 7:34; 15:1f).

Paul reminded the church in Corinth of this mystery and miracle of their inclusion and of the ground that is level at the foot of the cross, regardless of our former life, conduct and reputation:

“Do you not know that the wicked will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived: Neither the sexually immoral nor idolaters nor adulterers nor male prostitutes nor homosexual offenders nor thieves nor the greedy nor drunkards nor slanderers nor swindlers will inherit the kingdom of God. *And that is what some of you were. But you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God*” (1 Corinthians 6:9-11).

It's great to hear the testimony of converts from lives of corruption, perversion and dangerous, anti-social behavior, such as Tony Anthony, who has shared his story throughout Belgium in various evangelistic campaigns. The Apostle Paul shared the story of his radical conversion as “an example for those who would believe” on Jesus and be saved (1 Timothy 1:16). If God can save such sinners, he can and will save anyone who repents and believes in Christ. We need to recover the sense of mystery surrounding conversion, as a radical transformation of a person's life, character and destination. By the power of the Spirit, anyone can become a new creation in Christ (2 Corinthians 5:18). The mystery and miracle of the new birth should cause us to wonder at our own conversion and to believe that the most unlikely convert we can imagine can, by the power of God, become a trophy of his grace.

The message is inclusive but also is...

### *A unifying message*

This was a mystery to those who thought the Jews, the insiders, had this special access to God. But the mystery, praise God, is that the door to eternal life is open, the ground at the foot of the cross is level, and everyone who believes in and follows Jesus is welcome to join the body of Christ, whatever her or his past and lack of religious understanding and credentials. And when we come to Christ we experience a conversion that erases not only the past but any differences between us. We noted last Sunday how that we by God's grace have been brought near to God and necessarily to one another. The wall of distinction and separation and hostility has been torn down. And one new

race has been created: “Christians, Christ’s ones, followers of Jesus (2:11-22, esp. 15).

This unity is not by any human effort, but is possible only by the grace of God, and in this culture of religious separation, this unity between such alienated peoples was a revolutionary concept (Hoehner, 426). We should then understand what a sin it is to continue with or tolerate a divisive spirit in the church, the body of Christ and the holy Temple of God, where he has torn down all walls. If God has done so much to make us one, what a tragedy and transgression it is to create or tolerate broken relationships or to refuse to accept one another as brothers and sisters in the family of God!

We don’t choose our brothers and sisters in our families. They are, like us, simply born into our natural families and we accept their birth and addition to the family. In the same way, God adds to his body and brings us together by his sovereign will and we simply accept one another as God’s gifts to us. Not that we will not have our disagreements from time to time, but there is never a need or reason to be disagreeable at any time!

What Paul says about his calling to understand and make known this great message is true for us. We too are his witnesses and are responsible to understand and make known the mystery of the saving message of Christ. We are to understand the story of Jesus, how he died for sinners, and how he can forgive and transform anyone who admits to sin and is willing to turn to him and follow him as Lord. We need to realize also that no one is beyond the possibility of redemption and transformation, and that those who are transformed by grace become “members together of one body” (6). God’s purpose is to unite into his body those who have been and are being radically changed.

Nothing invigorates a church fellowship like the addition of new converts who are excited about their new life in Christ. The addition of these newly converted disciples reminds us of our own salvation history and calls us back to the initial enthusiasm we had and may have lost over the years. I pray that God will give IBC Brussels a fresh infusion of this new life and that we will restore the sense of wonder that God could and would save us and bring us together into this body of believers. We then understand that God’s purpose is to unite us in the mysterious unity of his body, the church.

And the church in the purpose of God also...

### **Engages in servant ministry with Christ (verses 7-13)**

Paul next explains that he became a servant of this great message, the good news of salvation through Christ. He uses the word “diakonos,” deacon, which was used for the servant of a king (Hoehner, 449). The church is called to be a servant church, living and giving and ministering in the Spirit and attitude of Christ, the Supreme Servant (Mark 10:45). We as God’s church are called to be servants of King Jesus, into...

### *A ministry that depends on the grace of Christ*

As was Paul, we who are followers of Jesus are saved by grace but also continue to depend on grace to allow us to fulfill his purpose for our lives as we engage in servant ministry, joining God in his kingdom work. This is work we cannot do in our strength, but as Paul makes clear in verses 7-13, is work done by his grace, his unmerited but desperately needed strength, “the working of his power” (7).

Paul understood that the premier qualification for being a servant and minister in kingdom of God service is to realize and admit one’s being inadequate and unqualified in oneself. To emphasize this, Paul used both a comparative and a superlative to describe himself, saying he was “less than the least” of all of God’s people (8). “Literally it is ‘leaster’ or ‘more least’ (Wood, 47). Some scholars think that Paul may have been playfully referring to his own name, “Paulus,” which means small, and to the fact that tradition says that Paul was small of stature (Wood, 47, Stott, 119).

Paul’s was not a false humility but was simply his awareness that he was unworthy of God’s grace that saved him from being a blasphemer of Christ to become a champion for Christ (1 Timothy 1:12-17). We too need to realize that we have nothing to offer Christ that he has not given to us (1 Corinthians 4:7). We may not have been dramatically saved from a notorious life as a Christ-hater, but we were as lost as was Saul of Tarsus apart from God’s rescue. Paul also knew that the work of making Christ known and of making disciples and planting churches was beyond any natural human ability. His calling was to simply allow the grace and power of Christ to work through him as he engaged in...

### *A ministry of proclamation of the message of Christ*

Paul realized the privilege of proclaiming the message of Christ, the unsearchable, “inexhaustible riches and generosity of Christ” (verse 8, *The Message*). He knew that the truth about Christ and about what he can do in the life of a sinner could never be exhausted. The more he learned about and the more he experienced Christ, the more he realized that the message could never be fully proclaimed in a thousand lifetimes. I realize as much as Paul that in my study and preaching I realize how inexhaustible is the truth about Christ (which is what John the Evangelist expressed in his gospel: 21:25).

Paul has used the word to “evangelize” (euangelizo, verse 8) the message of Christ, but also says he “brings to light” (photizo, verse 9) this message about Christ (Stott, 121). Christ is the answer to the spiritual darkness around us just as he was for those in ancient Ephesus. There is not a need he cannot supply or a problem he cannot solve or remedy for any disease he cannot cure.

I’ve been thinking a lot about illness lately, and have a growing appreciation for Marva Dawn’s insight into her own very complex set of many illnesses and physical maladies and handicaps, telling us how we can be well even when we are ill. I read the gospels about how Jesus healed every sort of illness and

disease and wonder why he doesn't choose to do so generally in our world today. I know we can't fully understand the problem of why bad things happen to God's people who seek to love and trust him. We simply have to bow at his feet and trust in his grace and realize he is at work preparing us for a better place (John 14:1-4).

Today we shared the grief process with those who have lost loved ones to the dreadful disease of cancer. How amazing it would be to find the cure for cancer! We should pray for and financially support those who are doing research that might eventually find the cure. Much has been done to provide help and in some cases healing from this disease, and hopefully more will be done to eventually eradicate it. If and when the cure is found, the privilege of sharing the news throughout the worldwide medical community would be overwhelming.

We have the news of an amazing Savior, and we ought to "evangelize" it. But we also need to "enlighten," bring to light the message of Christ in all of his depth. As your pastor, I'm called to "preach the Word" as well as to "do the work of an evangelist" (2 Timothy 4:2, 5). Not only am I to make plain the way of salvation and encourage unbelievers to trust and follow Christ, but also I am called to preach the unsearchable, inexhaustible riches of Christ (8). This means that Sunday by Sunday I must be prepared to teach and preach how Christ applies to our everyday life and how he supplies our needs and desires to fill us with his wisdom, love and joy. My calling is to seek to teach you some additional truth about Christ and what he should mean in your life and do in and through your life.

This was the kind of teaching that was lacking in the churches I attended as a child and a youth. Almost every Sunday the pastor's sermon was a variation on the plan of salvation, directed almost exclusively to unbelievers. And on many, if not most occasions, there were few or even no unbelievers (at least those who had not yet become hardened or oblivious by hearing this same theme every Sunday) in attendance. God's people need to be taught how Christ makes a difference in our lives, thus making us better prepared for godly living and for sharing the message of Christ in this sin-darkened world.

Paul says the enlightening message of Christ declares the "manifold wisdom," the imagery being that of a variegated cloth or pattern of many colors, suggesting "the intricate beauty of an embroidered pattern" or "the endless variety of colors in flowers" (Foulkes, 98). There should never be an excuse for boring, colorless preaching of Christ!

Paul says that we are called to understand and to proclaim the truth of Christ that amazes even heavenly beings (10). The demonic beings hate what they see and hear about Christ, especially his victory through the cross. And the angels cannot comprehend all that Christ has done for us. Perhaps, in verse 10, Paul "not only insists that all (heavenly beings) were made by Christ and are subject to Him, but also shows that in one way at least human beings in the blood-bought Church of God have a superior position to them all. They know and are to declare to these spiritual powers (1 Peter 1:12) the redeeming

purpose and work of the Almighty, the aspects of the manifold wisdom of God that otherwise they cannot know” (Foulkes, 98).

When Paul speaks of our task in making Christ known, he sees that we’re part of something that’s beyond this mortal life. We’re engaged in a cosmic battle with Christ against the forces of evil, which is included in Paul’s reference to “rulers (fallen) and authorities in the heavenly realms” (10). Satan and his dupes are involved in a battle for human souls, and Paul reminds us that in the drama of God’s cosmic purposes Satan’s authority has been broken and Christ can and does deliver souls from death when we faithfully proclaim the message of Christ (Lincoln, 193f). And once a soul is redeemed from this broken power of evil, there needs to be the feeding and growing upon the manifold riches of Christ.

Paul says that we are allowed to participate with God in his purpose in the church, which he accomplished in Christ Jesus our Lord (11). Our participation in God’s purpose is not just one of words shared but is also...

*A ministry of participation in the life of Christ*

Paul seems to add an aside in verses 12 and 13, but actually he says that our being involved in the work of the church, our being part of God’s purpose necessarily means that we participate in the life of Christ. Because of our relationship with Christ, our great High Priest, we have personal access to God and to his throne of grace (12 and Hebrews 4:14-16). Perhaps this is another fact that amazes the heavenly beings, including the devil himself, according to Job 1 & 2, who have access to God’s throne. We mortals have equal opportunity for equal access. We’re a part of kingdom life, and although we live in this mortal, fallen world of time and space limitations, we’re a part of eternal, kingdom living, and we participate in what God is doing. This 12<sup>th</sup> verse is a great insight into prayer as having an audience with God, who shares his plans with his children and his friends, which we are (John 15:14f).

We also participate with Christ, not in spite of, but especially because we share with him in his sufferings. We are called to live a cruciform life that reflects Christ sometimes best through our sufferings and allows us to know him in deeper fellowship (Philippians 3:10f). Paul’s friends at Ephesus, and perhaps in other churches in Asia Minor, had heard about his imprisonment in Rome and were beginning to doubt Paul’s credentials as an Apostle, a leader and teacher of the church (Bruce, 66). Like many “name it and claim it” evangelicals of today, they perhaps assumed that his suffering was due to Paul’s lack of faith and spiritual power. Obviously, this is not the gospel of the Christ of the cross, who promised we would suffer and be hated by the world that hates him (John 15:18ff).

Paul thus told the church that rather than be discouraged by his sufferings, they needed to realize that he was suffering because of his participation in the gospel, the message of Christ, who has given to them the glory of eternal life. And we must remember that we too are called to share Christ’s sufferings as a necessary prelude to and preparation for glory. We are called to authentic

living as faithful followers and disciples of Jesus, who then are qualified to share the saving message of Jesus. The witness of our lives *to* Jesus must authenticate the words we share *about* Jesus.

This past summer our son, Kyle, preached the sermon on a Sunday I had taken a holiday during his and our daughter-in-law's visit. My son, a seminary professor, has long since excelled me in scholarship, and has more to teach me than I can offer him. In that sermon he said the church is not to be simply missionary, but rather missional, a relatively new word. A missionary church sends some of its members on mission and gives financial support to mission causes. But God has called the church to be missional, with every member accepting the mission God has for each of us. The people of the missional church are always on mission with God, in the home, work place and community, and realize that our role, even if our income is through a secular business or government, is to be Christ's disciples, ambassadors and witnesses on mission with him.

### **Conclusion:**

I pray that you will resolve with me today to be a part of IBC Brussels, a church that is part of the purpose of God, indeed, a church that has a unique place and role in the purpose of God.

God has enabled us to resolve the church building issue. As elders we voiced in our recent meeting the need for us to focus now on God's purpose for us as a church and to challenge one another to be a part of his purpose. We must understand this glorious, mysterious message of Christ and how that faith in him and allowing him to live in us creates a spiritual unity that is humanly impossible. We also realize that we are called to participate in the very life of Christ as we join him in his mission in the world as his missional people.

We have the glorious, mysterious, life-changing message to reveal, to uncover for those who will hear. And we are to cause even the angels to marvel over how God is making this diverse congregation into a marvelous, mysterious and miraculous unity. We're at the forefront of a cosmic battle for the precious souls of those God has placed in our lives and in the pathway of this church and its ministries. I realize as never before the sacred task I have to preach Christ in his fullness, to continue to explore and share with you his riches.

Soon we will share the Lord's Supper, the Communion meal that celebrates our union with Christ but also our union with one another. And Paul tells the church to examine itself regarding our relationships and prepare our hearts to receive communion in a worthy manner.

As one has said, factions in the church turn the Lord's Supper into a farce (Stott, 130). Communion without union is not just meaningless, but is a mockery. As we partake together, let's resolve to be God's forgiven, forgiving and unified people, part of this mysterious union and part of the life of Christ and the work of the kingdom in this place.

**Thoughts and questions for personal reflection and/or group discussion:**

1. What is the meaning of mystery as Paul uses it in our text?
2. What was the basis of the unity of Jews (the religious insiders) and the Gentiles (secular outsiders) Paul writes about, and why was it such an amazing phenomenon?
3. What are some barriers that keep outsiders from an understanding and acceptance of the message of Christ today? Why would the destruction of these barriers be amazing and mysterious to angelic and demonic “heavenly beings”?
4. Imagine the most divided and mutually hostile people groups in the world or perhaps even in your own country or community. How could the message of Christ bring these groups into loving unity and fellowship?
5. In verses 7 & 8 Paul expresses genuine humility for the privilege of preaching Christ. What is our privilege regarding sharing the message of Christ, and should it call for our sense of unworthiness as well?
6. List what you think could be included in the “unsearchable riches of Christ,” that is, his characteristics and benefits we receive from him.
7. Paul exhorted the church to not be discouraged by his sufferings, as though they thought suffering was evidence that God was not blessing and using Paul (verse 13). What do you think is the place of suffering in the life of a disciple of Jesus, and what does this say to those who believe God wills for Christians to always be free of illness and always materially prosperous?

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