

To Paul, less than the least of all saints, grace was given to announce the unsearchable riches of Christ as the gospel and to enlighten all concerning the economy of the mystery, which had been hidden in God throughout the ages. According to the measure of the gift of Christ, Paul functioned as a member of the Body, as an apostle, as a joint of the rich supply, as a steward of grace, and penned the Epistle to the Ephesians. In both its structure and emphasis, Ephesians is a demonstration and proof of the centrality of the economy of God in the New Testament. Understanding the economy of God is the key to unlocking the riches contained in Ephesians, just as Paul's understanding of this economy informed, directed, and produced the Epistle to the Ephesians. The structure of Ephesians is built upon an organic hermeneutic of the Triune God, the tripartite man with special emphasis on the human spirit, and the church, which is resplendently revealed as the Body of Christ, the corporate issue of the organic union of the Triune God and the tripartite man. The emphasis in Ephesians is on the dispensing of the Triune God into the tripartite man for the producing of the church. The economy of God is Paul's hermeneutic in Ephesians, it is the content of his understanding of the mystery of Christ, and it is the gospel that he preached.

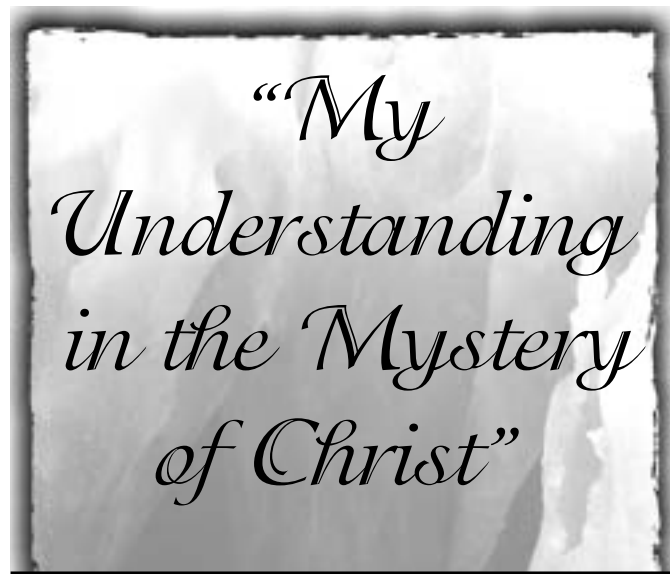
In some respects, viewing the economy of God merely as an interpretive principle, a hermeneutic, minifies its weight and presence in the divine revelation because this seemingly places it on par with other systems of interpretation. There are many ways to interpret the Bible, many themes which can be extracted, developed, embellished, and, systematized. And it is not unreasonable to suggest that the economic operation of the Triune God, the totality of God's salvific interaction with humanity, is not the most prominent theme in the Bible. In contrast, it could be argued that the kerygma, the core content of our Christian faith—the incarnation, redemptive death, resurrection,

ascension, and return of our Lord Jesus—occupies a more prominent place in the New Testament. In the Epistles of Paul, for example, these divine facts are the subject of emphatic reference and repetition.¹

In contrast to his constant and compelling emphasis on the person and work of Christ, Paul offers little in the way of similarly direct references to the economy of God. When he does refer to it, however, its importance is beyond dispute. Near the end of his ministry, he reminded Timothy of his exhortation to charge certain ones not to teach different things, things other than God's economy which is in faith (1 Tim. 1:3-4). With this exhortation, Paul identified the

totality of his teaching with the economy of God. Earlier in his ministry, he informed the Ephesians that he was called with a view to making known the economy of the mystery, which previously had been hidden in God (3:9). With this information, Paul subsumed all of his unique and precious insights concerning the person and work of Christ under the larger organizing principle of the economy of God.

Thus subsumed, the kerygma is not separate from the economy of God. Rather, it is the content of the economy of God, the content which Paul characterized as the unsearchable riches of Christ (v. 8). It is possible to study the great themes of Christ's incarnation, death, resurrection, and ascension in isolation, apart from a broader view of the economy of God, and never arrive at an understanding of the intrinsic connection between these divine realities and the fulfillment of the eternal economy of the Triune God, which is His eternal plan to dispense Himself in His Trinity into His chosen people so that He can have a corporate expression and enlargement of Himself. The subsumption of the kerygma under the broader interpretive principle of the economy of God is effectively illustrated in the footnote to 2 Corinthians 13:14 in the Recovery Version of the New Testament.



THE HERMENEUTIC OF PAUL IN EPHESIANS



In the Bible the Trinity is never revealed merely as a doctrine. It is always revealed or mentioned in regard to the relationship of God with His creatures, especially with man, who was created by Him, and more particularly with His chosen and redeemed people. The first divine title used in the divine revelation, *Elohim* in Hebrew, a title used in relation to God's creation, is plural in number (Gen. 1:1), implying that God, as the Creator of the heavens and the earth for man, is triune. Concerning His creation of man in His own image, after His own likeness, He used the plural pronouns *Us* and *Ours*, referring to His trinity (Gen. 1:26) and implying that He would be one with man and express Himself through man in His trinity. Later, in Gen. 3:22 and 11:7 and Isa. 6:8, He referred to Himself again and again as *Us* in regard to His relationship with man and with His chosen people.

In order to redeem fallen man that He might again have the position to be one with man, He became incarnated (John 1:1, 14) in the Son and through the Spirit (Luke 1:31-35) to be a man, and lived a human life on the earth, also in the Son (Luke 2:49) and by the Spirit (Luke 4:1; Matt. 12:28). At the beginning of His ministry on the earth, the Father anointed the Son with the Spirit (Matt. 3:16-17; Luke 4:18) in order that He might reach men and bring them back to Him. Just before He was crucified in the flesh and resurrected to become the life-giving Spirit (1 Cor. 15:45), He unveiled His mysterious trinity to His disciples in plain words (John 14-17), stating that the Son is in the Father and the Father is in the Son (John 14:9-11), that the Spirit is the transfiguration of the Son (John 14:16-20), that the three, coexisting and coinhering simultaneously, are abiding with the believers for their enjoyment (John 14:23; 17:21-23), and that all that the Father has is the Son's and all that the Son possesses is received by the Spirit to be declared to the believers (John 16:13-15). Such a Trinity is altogether related to the dispensing of the processed God into His believers (John 14:17, 20; 15:4-5) that they may be one in and with the Triune God (John 17:21-23).

After His resurrection He charged His disciples to disciple the nations, baptizing them into the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit (Matt. 28:19); that is, He charged the disciples to bring the believing ones into the Triune God, into an organic union with the processed God, who had passed through incarnation, human living, and crucifixion and had entered into resurrection. (Note 1)

Even though the economy of God is no longer inaccessibly

hidden within the being of God, who is now fully unveiled in the Son and imparted as the Spirit to the members of the household of the faith (Gal. 6:10), there is still a need for revelation and enlightenment in order to see the economy of God. This was Paul's experience, and it must be our experience. For Paul, the mystery was made known by revelation (Eph. 3:3) in his regenerated human spirit (v. 5), and we similarly need a spirit of wisdom and revelation in order to know and enter into the hope of our calling (1:17-18).²

Although many students of the Bible today are not guided and directed by an understanding of the economy of God, Paul was guided by this understanding in his ministry. The content of his revelation became the content of his spoken and written ministry. His understanding and participation in the mystery of Christ as a fellow heir, fellow member, and fellow partaker equipped him to minister according to the gift of grace, which was produced through his partaking of the promise in accordance with the operation of the resurrection life (3:6-7). In his ministry he produced fellow heirs, fellow members, and fellow partakers by presenting and dispensing the unsearchable riches of Christ as the gospel through his enlightenment of the economy of the mystery (vv. 6-9). To see the economy of the mystery is to enter into the economy of God and to become a partaker of the promise through the gospel.³

The Mystery of the Gospel, the Mystery of Christ, and the Economy of God

The subject of the gospel does not seem to occupy a central role in Ephesians, especially in contrast to its prominent role in other Epistles, notably Romans and Galatians. The gospel is a subtle, almost hidden component of Ephesians. It is easily overlooked, especially given

Paul's monumental and unique presentation of many items in the divine economy. For example, "the gospel of your salvation" in Ephesians 1:13 hardly stands out in the section devoted to the sealing and pledging of the Spirit (vv.

13-14). Similarly, the announcement of "peace as the gospel" in 2:17 is not as striking as Paul's description of the creation of the one new man on the cross and the reconciliation of both Jews and Gentiles in one Body (vv. 15-16). Likewise, having feet shod with the "firm foundation of the gospel of peace" does not particularly stand out in Paul's presentation of the whole armor of God (6:15).⁴ Despite its understated presence, the gospel is a significant component of Paul's presentation of the economy of God

EVEN THOUGH THE ECONOMY OF GOD IS NO LONGER
INACCESSIBLY HIDDEN WITHIN THE BEING OF GOD,
WHO IS NOW FULLY UNVEILED IN THE SON AND
IMPARTED AS THE SPIRIT TO THE MEMBERS OF THE
HOUSEHOLD OF THE FAITH, THERE IS STILL A NEED
FOR REVELATION AND ENLIGHTENMENT.

in Ephesians. In Paul's understanding, the *mystery of the gospel* and *the mystery of Christ* both synonymously refer to the same divine reality—the economy of God.

The correspondence of these terms can be seen in the remaining references to the gospel in Ephesians. In 6:19 Paul, seeking a spiritual supply from the Body, requests that prayers and petitions be made on his behalf: “And for me, that utterance may be given to me in the opening of my mouth, to make known in boldness the mystery of the gospel.” In this verse, Paul not only associates the content of his ministry with the gospel, but he also associates the gospel with the content of the revelation of the mystery that was made known to him. Paul draws a similar association between the gospel and the revelation of the mystery in Romans 16:25: “Now to Him who is able to establish you according to my gospel, that is, the proclamation of Jesus Christ, according to the revelation of the mystery, which has been kept in silence in the times of the ages.” Paul's speaking, his utterance, of the gospel was in accord with the revelation of the mystery; it was a proclamation of Jesus Christ in His unsearchable riches (Eph. 3:8). When he spoke of the gospel being according to the revelation of the mystery, he even personalized it, calling it “my gospel.” Any proclamation of Jesus Christ that was not in accord with the revelation of the mystery of Christ and not received through a revelation by Jesus Christ was “another gospel” to Paul (Gal. 1:12, 7). Similarly, any teaching that was not in accord with God's revealed economy was a different teaching to Paul (1 Tim. 1:3-4).⁵

For Paul, there is a fundamental relationship between God's revealed mystery and the economy of God. This relationship extends to the gospel as well because the essence of the gospel is the economy of God. The clearest connection between *the mystery of Christ*, *the economy of the mystery*, and *the gospel* is presented in Ephesians 3:2-9.

If indeed you have heard of the stewardship of the grace of God which was given to me for you, that by revelation the *mystery* was made known to me, as I have written previously in brief, by which, in reading it, you can perceive my understanding in the *mystery of Christ*, which in other generations was not made known to the sons of men, as it has now been revealed to His holy apostles and prophets in spirit, that in Christ Jesus the Gentiles are fellow heirs and fellow members of the Body and fellow partakers of the promise through *the gospel*, of which I became a minister according to the gift of the grace of God which was given to me according to the operation of His power. To me, less than the least of all saints, was this grace given to announce to the Gentiles the unsearchable riches of Christ as *the gospel* and to enlighten all that they may see what the *economy of the mystery* is, which throughout the ages has been hidden in God, who created all things. (emphasis added)

Paul begins by reminding the believers that his stewardship is based on the revelation of the mystery. For Paul, even his brief reference to the mystery in Ephesians 1:9-10 demonstrated his understanding in the mystery of Christ because verses 9 and 10 reveal that God purposed in Himself to have an economy, a dispensing, that would culminate at the fullness of the times with all things being headed up in Christ, and that in order to accomplish this economy, God made this mystery of His will known, even taking pleasure in making it known. Even though Paul's brief comments demonstrated an understanding in the mystery of Christ, he expands upon the foundational notion of the dispensing of the Triune God in 1:10 by showing that this dispensing results in the mutual inheritance of God by both believing Jews and believing Gentiles, occurs within the mutually incorporated divine and mystical realm of the organic Body of Christ, and issues from a mutual partaking of the promised God with all of His obtainments and attainments (3:6).

In God's New Testament economy the chosen, redeemed, and regenerated Gentiles and the believing Jews are fellow heirs of God, inheriting God. The saved Gentiles and the saved Jews are fellow members of the one Body of Christ as His unique expression. The Gentile believers and the Jewish believers are fellow partakers of God's promise given in the Old Testament, concerning all the blessings of God's New Testament economy. Being fellow heirs is related to the blessing of the household of God; being fellow members of the Body, to the blessing of the Body of Christ; and being fellow partakers of the promise, to the blessing of the promise of God, such as in Gen. 3:15; 12:3; 22:18; 28:14; and Isa. 9:6. Both the blessing of God's household and the blessing of Christ's Body are particular, whereas the blessing of God's promise is general, all-inclusive. (Recovery Version, Eph. 3:6, notes 1-3)

Just as the riches of God's grace abound when the mystery is made known (1:7-9), the gospel serves as the means through which the mutual inheritance, mutual incorporation, and mutual partaking occur for the regenerated believers, both Jews and Gentiles. The contents of the revelation are conveyed “through the gospel” (3:6). In the economy of God, there is revelation and dispensing on God's side, and there is enlightenment and stewardship on the believers' side. The dynamic connective link between the two is the gospel. The gospel conveys the content of God's New Testament economy, both from God to the believers and from believers to other believers. When Paul received a revelation of the mystery, he spontaneously became a minister of the gospel, and his ministry consisted of two vitally linked components. First, he announced the unsearchable riches of Christ as the gospel, directly dispensing these riches into the Body of Christ (v. 8). Second, he endeavored to enlighten all concerning the economy of the mystery so that all the members of the Body also

would participate in the work of the ministry (v. 9; 4:12), encouraged by the pattern of one who was less than the least of all saints (3:8). When the members of the Body of Christ function according to the operation in the measure of each one part (4:16), having been enlightened concerning the economy of the mystery and having been constituted with the riches of Christ, the riches of His grace will increasingly abound and ultimately consummate in the fulfillment of God's eternal economy with a display of His multifarious wisdom through the church (1:7-8; 3:10-11). This is the economy of God, and this economy is presented throughout the book of Ephesians from several unique, but fully organic, viewpoints.

The Economy of God and the Structure of Ephesians

The book of Ephesians is marvelously structured according to the economy of God. In each chapter, every vital element in God's economy is present, including the Triune God as the source, the dispensing of the Triune God as the means, the human spirit of the tripartite man as the focal point of this dispensing, and the Body of Christ as the issue of the dispensing of the Triune God into the tripartite man.

The entire divine revelation in the book of Ephesians concerning the producing, existing, growing, building up, and fighting of the church as the Body of Christ is composed of the divine economy, the dispensing of the Triune God into the members of the Body of Christ. (Recovery Version, 2 Cor. 13:14, note 1)

Throughout each chapter of Ephesians, the church as the Body of Christ is presented as an organism, the organic issue of the economy of God. There is no hint of organization and no place is given to any aspect of man's work. Only that which is good for the building up of the Body of Christ (4:29), as the organic expression of the Triune God in chapter one, the organic dwelling place of the Triune God in chapter two, the organic constitution of the riches of Christ in chapter three, the organic work of the Triune God in the members of the Body of Christ in chapter four, the organic increase of Christ in chapter five, and the organic representative of God's authority in chapter six, is presented by Paul.

The Body of Christ as the Fullness of God, an Organic Expression of God

In chapter one of Ephesians, Paul presents the clearest

picture of the operation of the economy of the Triune God in the New Testament. Beginning with the Father's selection and predestination of the believers in eternity past and ending with the Body of Christ as the fullness of the One who fills all in all in eternity future (vv. 4-5, 23), the process of the church becoming the organic expression of the Triune God is uniquely related to the dispensing of the Triune God into the tripartite man. Before the foundation of the world, before sin was a factor separating God and humankind, the Father, according to the good pleasure of His will, selected some in Christ and predestinated them unto sonship. God's desire for a holy expression can be accomplished only by the dispensing of the divine life with its holy nature. Only God is holy, and our destiny of being holy and without blemish before Him in love is a testimony to both the goal and the triumph of the divine economy.

In order to accomplish the eternal will of the Father, Christ opened the way for the forgiveness of our offenses through the shedding of His redeeming blood on the cross (v. 7). His death fully dealt with our sin and sins and removed the barrier that temporarily frustrated the dispensing of the divine life. Based on Christ's redemption, the riches of His grace can abound to us according to the wisdom and prudence of God (v. 8). The riches of the Son as grace begin to abound when God makes the mystery of His will known to us in all wisdom and prudence (v. 9). This, in turn, produces the dispensing of the Triune God that alone can counteract the rebellious vestiges of the fall (v. 10). Through these abounding riches, the church is progressively headed up in Christ.

The economy that God, according to His desire, planned and purposed in Himself is to head up all things in Christ at the fullness of the times. This is accomplished through

THROUGHOUT EACH CHAPTER OF EPHESIANS,
THE CHURCH AS THE BODY OF CHRIST
IS PRESENTED AS AN ORGANISM, THE ORGANIC
ISSUE OF THE ECONOMY OF GOD. THERE IS
NO HINT OF ORGANIZATION AND NO PLACE
IS GIVEN TO ANY ASPECT OF MAN'S WORK.

the dispensing of the abundant life supply of the Triune God as the life factor into all the members of the church that they may rise up from the death situation and be attached to the Body. (Recovery Version, Eph. 1:10, note 1)

As the Body of Christ is headed up in the divine life, it grows in its organic expression of the Triune God. In this growing process, all things work according to the counsel of God's will to bring the Body to the point of being worthy of God's full inheritance (v. 11). The process of being headed up is carried out by the Spirit's application of the Son's accomplished redemption. The Spirit's application begins with the hearing of the word of the truth,

the gospel of our salvation. When we heard the contents of God's salvation, we were sealed with the Holy Spirit of the promise in our human spirit (v. 13; John 3:6). Hearing and believing, we became partakers of the promise (Eph. 3:6); that is, we received and began to enjoy the Spirit as the pledge of our inheritance (1:14).⁶ The sealing and pledging of the Spirit are the dispensing of the Triune God. This dispensing is now available, and it will continue until every part of our being, even our physical body, is fully redeemed and brought to the point of being to the praise of His glory. The dispensing of the Triune God, through the abounding riches of His grace, will ultimately produce glory—not ours, but His. In this glory, the Body of Christ, as the fullness of the One who fills all in all, will organically express the Triune God who has been dispensed into the members of the Body of Christ.

In order for the members of the Body to fully enter into the economy of God revealed in verses 3 through 14, Paul realized that there is a need for revelation, and so he prayed that the Ephesians would be granted a revelation of this economy in their regenerated human spirit. A spirit of wisdom and revelation in the full knowledge of Him is our entrance into the subjective experience of the hope of our calling (vv. 17-18). Our hope is the Triune God being fully dispensed into and expressed through His organic Body. This dispensing imparts the surpassingly great power of the divine life, the resurrection life, which operates according to the might of His strength. The power of the divine life operating in our human spirit is the same power that operated to raise Christ from the dead, to seat Him in the heavenlies, and to subject all things under His feet (vv. 19-22). The dispensing of the Triune God involves every part of our being—our human spirit, the enlightened eyes of our heart, and ultimately our redeemed body. Based on the Father's selection and predestination, the Son's redemption, and the Spirit's sealing and pledging, every part of our being will be filled with the divine life, and the church, as an organism of the Triune God, will fully express the One who fills all in all (v. 23). This is the economy of God in chapter one.

*The Body of Christ as the One New Man,
an Organic Masterpiece and Dwelling Place of God*

In chapter two of Ephesians, Paul details the dynamic operation of the economy of the Triune God upon dead and divided humanity to produce the Body of Christ as an organic masterpiece and to build the Body of Christ into an organic dwelling place. The dynamism of the economy of God is evident in Paul's description of the desolate state of the human material, the wood (Hag. 1:8), that is gathered together and transformed into an organic dwelling place of God. When the economy of God that was planned in eternity past began to unfold in time, the human condition was pitiful. We were dead in offenses and sins, and we

were walking according to the age of this world, according to Satan, the ruler of the authority of the air, and the spirit operating in the sons of disobedience (Eph. 2:1-2). "When we were dead in offenses and sins, we walked not only according to the age of this world but also according to Satan, the ruler of the aerial authority, the evil spiritual power" (Recovery Version, Eph. 2:2, note 3). In such a condition, we knew nothing of the positive things planned for us in the economy of God: We were apart from Christ, alienated from the commonwealth of Israel, and strangers to the covenants of the promise. We were without hope, without God, and in the world (v. 12). Rather than being according to and partaking of God's holy nature (Heb. 12:10), we were children of another nature. We conducted ourselves in the lusts of the flesh, doing the desires of the flesh and of the thoughts, according to the operation of our fallen nature (Eph. 2:3).

But even in this condition, God was rich in mercy because of His great love for those whom He had chosen in Christ (v. 4), and we were made alive together with Christ in His enlivening resurrection (v. 5, cf. Col. 2:13; 1 Pet. 1:3). This enlivening was a corporate enlivening. We were made alive *together* with all the marked out ones, both Jews and Gentiles, according to the riches of His saving grace.

We were saved not only as sinners but also as dead persons, and not only by Christ's death with its redemption but also by His resurrection with its resurrection life, and even by His ascension with its transcendency. This is the transcending salvation given to the dead sinners by the incarnated, crucified, resurrected, and ascended Christ, the very embodiment of the processed Triune God. Such a salvation produces the church as the issue of the processed Divine Trinity for His expression. (Recovery Version, Eph. 2:5, note 5)

By enlivening, raising, and seating us together with Christ in the heavenlies, the organic salvation of the Triune God is displayed through an organic masterpiece, the Body of Christ as the corporate issue of the economy of God (v. 10). This masterpiece is an organism, and in chapter two of Ephesians, the Body is specifically revealed as the one new man, which has been created through the operation and dispensing of the Triune God (v. 15). This operation not only brings those who were once far off into the blessings of the economy of God, but it also bring us into the very being of the Triune God (vv. 13, 18).

The first aspect of this operation involves the work of Christ on the cross to annul all human and cultural distinctions. In the eyes of God there are only two races of people—Gentiles, the created race, and Jews, the called race. This separation, necessary for the fulfillment of the economy of God so that a Savior could be prepared for all

humankind, resulted in a middle wall of partition, creating enmity associated with the law of the commandments in ordinances (vv. 14-15). Through Christ's work on the cross, those who were far off, the Gentiles, were brought near to God and to His promises in the blood of Christ (v. 13). By abolishing the law of the commandments in ordinances, the middle wall was broken down, and both Jews and Gentiles were reconciled in one Body, the Body of Christ as the one new man (vv. 15-16). Now Christ Himself is our peace, and the dead and divided heritage of fallen humanity has been fully overcome (v. 14).

Christ, who accomplished full redemption for both the Jewish and the Gentile believers, is Himself our peace, our harmony, making both one. Because of the fall of mankind and the calling of the chosen race, there was a separation between Israel and the Gentiles. Through Christ's redemption this separation has been removed. Now, in the redeeming Christ, who is the bond of oneness, both are one. (Recovery Version, v. 14, note 2)

The peace which Christ created on the cross is applied through His coming as the Spirit, who announces peace as the gospel, and so through Him, we both have access in one Spirit unto the Father (vv. 17-18). The operation of the Triune God brings us into the Triune God. "Through God the Son, who is the Accomplisher, the means, and in God the Spirit, who is the Executor, the application, we have access unto God the Father, who is the Originator, the source of our enjoyment" (Recovery Version, v. 18, note 4). As those who enjoy access unto the Father, we are no longer strangers, but members of God's family through our mutual partaking of the divine life and fellow citizens with the saints who have been joined to the kingdom of God through the birth of the divine Spirit in our human spirit (v. 19; John 3:5-6). Based on God's dispensing and on our partaking of the divine life, the one new man, as an organism, is being fitted together and growing into a holy temple (Eph. 2:21). Thus the deadened and divided wood of our humanity is being transformed and mutually incorporated into material for God's temple through the indwelling of God's Spirit in our human spirit. This is the economy of God in chapter two.

*The Body of Christ as God's Wise Display,
an Organic Constitution of the Riches of Christ*

In chapter three of Ephesians, the subjective experience of the economy of God is presented through Paul's revelation

of the Body of Christ as an organic constitution of the riches of Christ, wisely displaying all that God is and fully accomplishing the eternal purpose of God which was made in Christ Jesus. This constitution is a result of Paul's participation in the economy of God as a steward who dispensed the riches of Christ as grace (v. 2). It is also the result of the saints' experience of the Triune God, beginning with the Father's strengthening us into our regenerated human spirit through the Spirit so that Christ can make His corporate home in our hearts (vv. 16-17) and consummating with the church being filled unto all the fullness of God (v. 19).

In many respects, the beginning of our experience of the economy of God is revelation. This was Paul's experience. His entrance into the Body of Christ was by revelation (Acts 9:3-6), and in this revelation God's Son was revealed in him, and he immediately began to preach this revealed Christ as the gospel (Gal. 1:16). He was obedient to this heavenly vision to the point of becoming a prisoner of Christ Jesus (Acts 26:19; Eph. 3:1). In his status as a prisoner, he served the Body as a steward, dispensing the riches of Christ that had been revealed into his human spirit (vv. 2, 5). These riches are the content of the mystery of Christ and the gospel (v. 8). He was a minister according to the grace of God; that is, he ministered the Christ who was constituted into him through the gift of the grace of God (v. 7). The grace that was given to him for his constitution was subsequently given to the Body for its constitution (v. 2). Paul "announced not doctrines but the riches of Christ. The riches of Christ are what Christ is to us, such as light, life, righteousness, and holiness, what He has for us, and what He accomplished, attained, and obtained for us" (Recovery Version, v. 8, note 3). When the unsearchable riches of the constituted Christ are announced as the gospel,

AS THE RICHES OF CHRIST ARE
PROGRESSIVELY EXPERIENCED BY AND
SUBJECTIVELY INCORPORATED INTO THE SAINTS,
THE CHURCH BECOMES A WISE DISPLAY
OF ALL THAT GOD IS TO FULFILL
THE ETERNAL PURPOSE OF GOD.

the economy of the mystery is fully operative; that is, Christ is dispensed into the members of the Body for their constitution (vv. 8-9). As the riches of Christ are progressively experienced by and subjectively in-

corporated into the saints, the multifarious wisdom of God is made known through the church (v. 10). Thus, the church becomes a wise display of all that God is to fulfill the eternal purpose of God (v. 11), being universally displayed before the rulers and the authorities in the heavenlies.

Just as our entrance into the economy of God begins with a revelation of Christ in our human spirit (v. 5),

our continuing experience of the economy of God depends upon our human spirit. It is for this reason that Paul spontaneously utters perhaps the highest prayer in the New Testament.⁷ His prayer is for the church's experience of the economy of God, and it focuses on the central role of our human spirit and the economic operation of the Father, Son, and Spirit.

The apostle prayed that God the Father would grant the believers to be strengthened through God the Spirit into their inner man, that Christ, God the Son, may make His home in their hearts, that is, occupy their entire being, that they may be filled unto all the fullness of God (Eph. 3:14-19). This is the climax of the believers' experience of and participation in God in His trinity. (Recovery Version, 2 Cor. 13:14, note 1)

When the riches of Christ are constituted into the Body of Christ through Christ making His home in our hearts, the issue will be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout eternity (Eph. 3:21). This constitution will occur, and God will be wisely and organically displayed through the Body of Christ because, like Paul, some members will forsake every endeavor that does not further the economy of God, becoming prisoners of Christ to dispense the riches of His grace, and because the fulfillment of the eternal economy of God ultimately rests with the operation of the Triune God Himself, who is able to do superabundantly above all that we ask or think. This is the experience of the economy of God in chapter three.

The Body of Christ as the Unique Completion of God's One Work, the Organic Building and Living of God and Man

In chapter four of Ephesians, Paul presents the Body of Christ as the singular goal of the one central work of God. As believers, we arrive at this unique goal through the dispensing of the Triune God into and through the members of the Body, which produces a God-man living that matches the reality of Jesus' human living, that bears each member in an atmosphere of love, and that brings each member fully into the work of the ministry for the consummate building up of the Body of Christ. The dispensing of the Triune God operates in each member, from center to circumference, from the human spirit to the renewing of the mind, the leading part of the soul, to a body that is fully sealed unto the day of redemption. Chapter four fully describes the mingled living of God and man in and for the organic building up of the Body of Christ as the completion of the Triune God's economic work.

Paul begins chapter four by exhorting the believers to walk worthily of their calling, displaying the virtues of lowliness, meekness, long-suffering, and the willingness to bear with one another in love so that the oneness of the Spirit can be kept (vv. 1-3). He ends the chapter with a similar exhortation

related to the living of the members of the Body, encouraging the believers to let all bitterness, anger, wrath, clamor, and evil speaking be removed from among them, and also to be kind, tenderhearted, and forgiving of one another (vv. 31-32). These virtues are beyond the capacity of the life and nature that directed our former manner of living, the life of the old man which has been corrupted according to the lusts of the deceit (v. 22). Consequently, these virtues are an expression of a God-man living that comes forth out of the new man, which was created according to God in righteousness and holiness of the reality (v. 24). "The old man was created outwardly according to the image of God but without God's life and nature (Gen. 1:26-27), whereas the new man was created inwardly according to God Himself and with God's life and nature (Col. 3:10)" (Recovery Version, v. 24, note 3).

The organic living that comes out of God's life and nature is a life of putting off the old man and putting on the new man (vv. 22, 24) that finds its expression in the progressive constitution of our tripartite being in the divine life. This life spreads from our regenerated human spirit, renews our mind by drawing from Christ as the new man who is joined to us as one spirit (vv. 23-24), and redeems our body through the saturated sealing of the Holy Spirit who has not been grieved by a living that is sourced in our former manner of living (v. 30). The life of the new man and the living that issues out from the spirit in the members of the Body of Christ alone has the capacity to display these virtues. The virtues are the issue of learning Christ, having heard Him and being taught in Him as the reality is in Jesus (vv. 20-21).

The reality is in Jesus refers to the actual condition of the life of Jesus as recorded in the four Gospels. In the godless walk of the nations, the fallen people, there is vanity. But in the godly life of Jesus there is truth, reality. Jesus lived a life in which He did everything in God, with God, and for God. God was in His living, and He was one with God. This is what is meant by *the reality is in Jesus*. We, the believers, who are regenerated with Christ as our life and are taught in Him, learn from Him as the reality is in Jesus. (Recovery Version, v. 21, note 1)

The reality of Jesus' God-man living produces an atmosphere of love and acceptance among all the members of the Body of Christ (vv. 2, 15; 3:17), which is an organic reproduction of the atmosphere of love in which the Triune God planned His central work of gaining an enlarged expression in the Son in eternity past (1:4). In such an atmosphere of love, the truth is held and the members grow up into Christ, who is the Head (4:15), and out from the Head, the Body fully enters into the economy of God, building itself up in love through the operation in the measure of each one part (v. 16). The operation in the measure of each one part is made possible by the joining

and knitting that comes through the joints of the rich supply of the divine life, the gifts who have been given by Christ to the Body for the perfecting of the saints (vv. 8, 12). These gifts include apostles, prophets, evangelists, and shepherds and teachers (v. 11).

In an atmosphere of love and in an environment of perfecting, the work of the ministry advances, and winds of teaching in the sleight of men are incapable of disturbing or tossing the members of the Body as if they were little children (v. 14). Rather, the Body has the capacity and the supply to grow up into Christ and to mature in the divine life (v. 15). In the work of the ministry, the Triune God, who is the Father over all, the Son through all, and the Spirit in all the believers (v. 6), dispenses the life supply and provides gifts as joints of the rich supply to perfect, join, and knit the Body together so that the measure of the gift of Christ in each one part can be released to build up the Body of Christ (vv. 7, 16). Only the dispensing of the Triune God, flowing in the living and work of the members of the Body, keeps the oneness of the Spirit in the uniting bond of peace (v. 3), and only the dispensing of the Triune God enables us all to arrive at the oneness of the faith and of the full knowledge of the Son of God, at a full-grown man, at the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ (v. 13). The Body as the fullness of Christ marks the unique completion of God's organic work. This is the economy of God in chapter four.

The Body of Christ as the Bride, the Organic Counterpart and Increase of Christ

In chapter five Paul presents the Body of Christ as the organic counterpart and increase of Christ—the issue of a deeper experience of love and light in the economy of God. The expression of this deeper experience is a walk in the divine life that reproduces and imitates the Triune God in all goodness, righteousness, and truth, that is subject to the sacrificing and sanctifying Christ, and that is sustained by the nourishing and cherishing Christ. This experience produces an organic counterpart and increase of Christ, the Body as a loving bride, and it fulfills the great mystery in the economy of God, which is Christ and the church.

In the believers' walk, there is a progression in the divine economy from a walk in grace and truth, which builds up the Body as an expression of Christ, to a walk in love and light, which fully transforms the Body into an organic

counterpart of Christ. Just as Eve came out of Adam, enlarging him as bone of his bones and flesh of his flesh (Gen. 2:23-24), the church comes out of Christ, enlarging Him by being joined to Him as one spirit (1 Cor. 6:17; Eph. 5:31-32). The church, as the bride of Christ, matches Him in life and nature, and the operation of this life in the believers transforms the believers into an organic increase of Christ. Only the dispensing of the Triune God can produce a walk in love and light because love and light are just God Himself.

Love and light are deeper than grace and truth. Hence, the apostle first took grace and truth as the basic elements for his exhortation, and then love and light. This implies that he wanted our daily walk to grow deeper, to progress from the outward elements to the inward.

Love is the inner substance of God, whereas light is the expressed element of God. The inward love of God is sensible, and the outward light of God is visible. Our walk in love should be constituted of both the loving substance and the shining element of God. These should be the inner source of our walk. They are deeper than grace and truth. (Recovery Version, v. 2, note 1)

A walk in love and light is beyond the capacity of the fallen natural human life, which is expressed through such things as fornication, uncleanness, greediness, obscenity, foolish talking, and sly, filthy jesting (vv. 3-4). To avoid having these things named among us, there is a need for the believers to maintain their status as saints, those who have been separated unto God and who are partaking of His divine, holy nature (v. 3; 2 Pet. 1:4). While the sons of disobedience partake of a nature of wrath and produce unfruitful works of darkness (Eph. 5:6-7, 11), the children of light partake of the divine nature

and bear fruit of the light, consisting in all goodness and righteousness and truth (vv. 8-9). The fruit of the light is produced by partaking of the Triune God, and the fruit of the light is even the Triune God.

THE REALITY OF JESUS' GOD-MAN LIVING PRODUCES AN ATMOSPHERE OF LOVE AND ACCEPTANCE AMONG ALL THE MEMBERS OF THE BODY OF CHRIST, WHICH IS AN ORGANIC REPRODUCTION OF THE ATMOSPHERE OF LOVE IN WHICH THE TRIUNE GOD PLANNED HIS CENTRAL WORK IN ETERNITY PAST.

The fruit of the light in goodness, righteousness, and truth is related to the Triune God. Goodness denotes God the Father, for the only one who is good is God (Matt. 19:17). Righteousness denotes God the Son, for Christ came to accomplish God's purpose according to God's righteous procedure (Rom. 5:17-18, 21). Truth denotes God the Spirit, for He is the Spirit of reality (John 14:17). Truth also denotes the expression of the fruit in the light. (Recovery Version, v. 9, note 1)

The fruit of the light comes from the light, and in the economy of God believers are no longer darkness; rather, they are light in the Lord (v. 8). This implies transformation. The signs of transformation are evident in a renewed mind that is governed by the very essence of the Triune God. Those who are light in the Lord walk as wise, not as unwise (v. 15). Knowing that the days are evil, they redeem the time (v. 16). Understanding the will of God, they are not foolish (v. 17). Longing to be presented to the Lord as a chaste virgin without spot, wrinkle, or blemish, they shun the dissoluteness associated with satisfying the lusts of the flesh and instead are filled in their regenerated, human spirit (2 Cor. 11:2; Eph. 5:27, 18). Being filled in their spirit, they enjoy the flowing of the divine life, both to the other members of the Body and to the Lord (v. 19). Being renewed in the spirit of their mind, they can give thanks at all times for all things in the name, the very person, of Jesus Christ (v. 20). Finally, having a healthy fear of offending Christ, they are subject to one another as wives are to their husbands and the church is to Christ (v. 21).

The transformation that produces a walk in love and light comes from Christ's intrinsic operation as the church subjects itself to Him (v. 24). Transformation depends upon life, and this life has been released by the church-loving Christ who gave Himself up on the cross so that the divine life could be released (v. 25). The operation of this divine life sanctifies the church, cleansing the church by the washing of the water in the word, which is the supply contained in the indwelling Spirit's instant speaking (v. 26).

The indwelling Christ as the life-giving Spirit is always speaking an instant, present, living word to metabolically cleanse away the old and replace it with the new, causing an inward transformation. The cleansing by the washing of the water of life is in the word of Christ. (Recovery Version, v. 26, note 4)

The instant speaking of the indwelling Christ is the dispensing of the Triune God, and it occurs within an environment of love that is sustained by Christ's inward nourishing and cherishing with the divine life (v. 29). The issue of Christ's inward operation is not just the producing of the church as a bride, as an entity apart from Christ, but rather the fulfillment of the great mystery—Christ and the church, that is, the church as the increase of Christ and even the organic counterpart of Christ (v. 32). This is the economy of God in chapter five.

The Body of Christ as a Corporate Man Organically Exercising Dominion

In chapter six Paul comes down from the lofty levels of his economical presentation of the church as the

completed work of God in chapter four and the fulfillment of the great mystery in chapter five. His final revelation of the church is a corporate man, fighting on behalf of God's interests on the earth in this age and organically exercising dominion on behalf of God for the completion of God's economy in order to utterly defeat God's enemy. It seems as if Paul has a strong realization that God's economy will not be fulfilled unless the church corporately exercises God's dominion in the ongoing struggle against the rulers, the authorities, the world-rulers of this darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenlies (v. 12). This struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the arrayed forces of rebellion in this universe. Against such a backdrop and even constitution of rebellion, it is obedience and submission in the economy of God that will prevail, and so Paul presents many practical areas in our human living that have been divinely ordained by God to help us learn and be constituted with the obedience that is in the Lord. These areas include relationships between children and parents and between slaves and masters (vv. 1-9).

Every experience of true obedience is in the Lord, and the power necessary to defeat God's arrayed enemies is also in the Lord (vv. 1, 10); that is, it is made available to the Body through the economical dispensing of the Triune God. When the Triune God is dispensed and received, the Body is able to apply the Triune God in the arena of spiritual warfare. This warfare is fought by "being empowered in the Lord, God the Son, putting on the whole armor of God the Father, and wielding the sword of God the Spirit (Eph. 6:10, 11, 17). This is the believers' experience and enjoyment of the Triune God even in the spiritual warfare" (Recovery Version, 2 Cor. 13:14, note 1). Spiritual warfare also involves the dispensing of the Triune God into the tripartite man, which begins practically with prayers and petitions that originate from the human spirit, but which wield the Spirit, being the word of God, as a sword. With God as armor, with the obedience of the Lord to do the will of the Lord, and with the empowering that is in the Lord, the church, as a corporate man, is fully positioned to exercise God's dominion on this earth through the prayers and petitions of the saints. This is the economy of God in chapter six.

Finishing the Mystery of God

From being the expression, the image of God, as the fullness of the One who fills all in all in chapter one to being a corporate man exercising dominion in chapter six, the economy of the mystery, the gospel of the dispensing of the Triune God into the tripartite man, is presented in a complete and full way in Ephesians. The economy of God is the hermeneutic of Ephesians. All other interpretive principles, even ones based on

redemption alone cannot account for the completeness of the revelation of Christ and the church in Ephesians, nor can they correspond to the very stated purpose of the Triune God in creating man as a tripartite vessel—image and dominion. This purpose is fulfilled in and through Christ, who is the image of God and the Head over all things, and the church, which is the fullness of the One who fills all in all and the Body of the Head. Eventually, through the economy of God, the good news of God’s dispensing will be announced, revealed, and enjoyed by the members of the Body, and then the mystery of God will be finished (Rev. 10:7). May our love for the Lord be in incorruptibility, and may the gospel that we announce in boldness match the understanding of Paul in Ephesians. **AF**

Notes

¹To the Corinthians Paul determined not to know anything except Jesus Christ and this One crucified (1 Cor. 2:2), and to the Philippians, it was not irksome for him to write the same things concerning Christ (3:1).

²See “The Hope of Our Calling: Experiencing the Economy of God in Ephesians” in *Affirmation & Critique* IV.2 (April 1999): 25-36, for a fuller association of the economy of God with Paul’s understanding of the hope of our calling. Our hope is not heaven, but it is Christ revealed and formed in us, becoming within us the hope of glory through our constitution with and enjoyment of the unsearchable riches of Christ as grace, making us, ultimately, to the praise of the glory of His grace (Gal. 1:16; 4:19; Col. 1:27; Eph. 3:8; 1:6).

³When the Galatians saw the crucified Christ whom Paul openly portrayed (Gal. 3:1), the effectiveness of Christ’s death on the cross on their behalf was applied when they received the Spirit through the hearing of faith (v. 2), which served as their entrance into the economy of God. Paul enlightened the Galatians concerning just one unsearchably rich aspect of the economy of God, the death of Christ, and the Galatians became partakers of the totality of the promises through the gospel. When the last Adam became the life-giving Spirit, all the experiences of His incarnation (being born into the race of Adam), His human living (being according to the race of Adam yet without sin), His death (being the last Adam), His resurrection (being life-giving), and His ascension, descension, and indwelling (being economically received as the Spirit), were compounded into the Spirit and made available to those, who

through God’s gracious gift of faith (Eph. 2:8), have been joined to the Lord. When the Galatians received the Spirit, the effectiveness of Christ’s death was applied to them, effectuating their redemption out from the curse of the law and bringing them into the realm of grace.

⁴Of all the items that constitute the whole armor of God, only the sword of the Spirit is offensive in nature; the remaining five items are defensive. As such, the gospel of peace rarely receives more attention than the sword of the Spirit.

⁵Much of what is presented in today’s Christianity, strictly speaking, is not another gospel, because the central tenets of the faith concerning the person and work of Christ are announced. He is rightly acknowledged as the Son of the living God (Matt. 16:16), and He is rightly presented as the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world (John 1:29). But when the gospel is essentially limited to these two points and directed primarily to unbelievers, there is a lurking danger of being in the principle of another gospel because so much of our unsearchably rich Christ is not presented and not properly directed toward the believers in this scaled-down version of the gospel. Paul certainly presented the gospel to unbelievers in the hope that men would be saved and come to the full knowledge of the truth (1 Tim. 2:4), and several of his messages to unbelievers are recorded in the book of Acts. The vast majority of his gospel utterance that has been preserved in the Bible, however, comes in the form of written letters to the believers in the churches that he had raised up and whom he desired to fully establish according to the contents of his gospel (Rom. 16:25). Our concept of the gospel, being the economy of God, must be enlarged. The unsearchable riches of Christ are the gospel. If we merely focus on one aspect of these riches, the redemptive death of Christ and our reconciliation to God, the impact of the gospel, as a means of conveying God’s economy, will be profoundly limited.

IN THE ECONOMY OF GOD BELIEVERS ARE
NO LONGER DARKNESS; RATHER, THEY ARE LIGHT
IN THE LORD. THIS IMPLIES TRANSFORMATION.
THE SIGNS OF TRANSFORMATION ARE EVIDENT
IN A RENEWED MIND THAT IS GOVERNED BY THE
VERY ESSENCE OF THE TRIUNE GOD.

⁶The joy of salvation that needs to be restored to so many believers is the enjoyment of the Spirit as the foretaste of the Triune God.

⁷The contents of Paul’s prayer in chapter three of Ephesians are considered in more detail in “The Hope of Our Calling: Experiencing the Economy of God in Ephesians” in *Affirmation & Critique* IV.2 (April 1999): 25-36.

Works Cited

Lee, Witness. Footnotes. Recovery Version of the New Testament. Anaheim: Living Stream Ministry, 1991.