



The Economy of God as the Source, Content, and Issue of Paul's Teaching in Ephesians

by John Pester

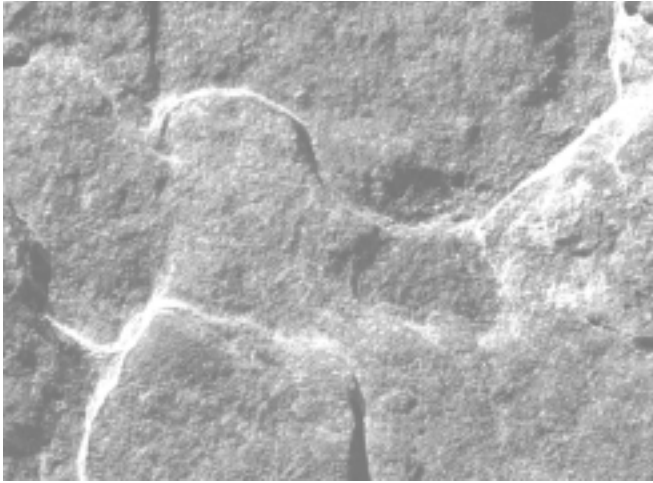
It is common, natural, and fallen to equate the apostles' teaching merely with a defined set of orthodox doctrines. It is common because it is easier to create systems of theology than to grasp the divine realities contained in words that are spirit and life. It is natural because it is easier to inscribe with ink than to inscribe with the Spirit of the living God. It is fallen because it is easier to touch the things of God with a trained mind than to touch them with a renewed mind. By corollary, it is also common, natural, and fallen to assume that mere pedagogical fidelity to a set of orthodox doctrines brings one in line with the ministry that is identified in the New Testament as the apostles' teaching. It is common because it is easier to speak about God than to speak forth God. It is natural because it is easier to employ persuasive words than to demonstrate Spirit and power, and it is fallen because it is easier for us to work for the Lord than to let the Lord work in us. Consequently, knowing doctrines is mistakenly regarded as the preeminent qualification for ministry, and repeating doctrines is mistakenly regarded as the preeminent proof of one's fidelity to the New Testament ministry. Nothing, however, could be further from the reality in God's economy, and nothing could be further from the experience of the one who advanced and completed the word of God with his teaching, the apostle Paul.

The apostles' teaching cannot be confined to a set of doctrines nor can it be conveyed through the mere repetition of doctrines because there is an intrinsic, organic relationship between the teaching of the apostles and the economy of God. The economy of God is the source, the content, and issue of the apostles' teaching, and Paul effectively demonstrates this in the book of Ephesians. Apart from our participation in the economy of God, all our words and teaching are merely winds that toss and carry the believers away from the goal of the building up of the Body of Christ.

The Economy of God and the Apostles' Teaching

The relationship between the economy of God and the apostles' teaching is rooted in the divine life of the Triune God, who is our unique portion, our unique inheritance (Col. 1:12; Eph. 1:14), and who, as life, is now being dispensed into His chosen and redeemed tripartite elect. The Triune God is an organic being. His very name—Father, Son, and Spirit—signifies relationships within the Godhead that principally manifest and express an eternal begetting in the divine life and an eternal glorification of the divine life.¹ As life, even as resurrection life (John 11:25), it is the eternal pleasure of the Father to reveal and impart His life in the Son through the Spirit (Matt. 3:17; 17:5; Gal. 1:15-16). The economy of God, coming out of God's desire to have many sons who are conformed in life to the image of His unique Son (Rom. 8:29), is the plan and arrangement of the Triune God to carry out this desire.

According to the New Testament, there was a time when the economy of God was not known by the sons of men (Eph. 3:3-5). It was hidden from the ages and from the generations (Col. 1:26), being hidden within God Himself (Eph. 3:9). Only as God progressively revealed Himself, making Himself available through the incarnation, death, and resurrection of the Son and through the regeneration and indwelling of the Spirit in man's human spirit, has the economy of the mystery fully been revealed.² The economy of God reveals God, imparts the revealed God, and reproduces the imparted God. The economy of God is not separate from God; it is not simply something that God does; it is God, and it is God in action.³ The means for revealing, imparting, and reproducing the Triune God, according to His economy, is the teaching of the apostles. Properly understood, the apostles' teaching is the healthy teaching that reveals, contains, and conveys the Triune God in His New Testament economy.



The New Testament characterization of the teaching of the Lord and the apostles as “healthy words” and “healthy teaching” underscores the reality that the divine life is the intrinsic component of the apostles’ teaching (1 Tim. 1:10; 6:3; 2 Tim. 1:13; 4:3; Titus 1:9; 2:1). “The words of our Lord Jesus Christ are words of life (John 6:63); hence, they are healthy words” (Recovery Version, 1 Tim. 6:3, note 2).

Healthy implies the matter of life. The sound teaching of the apostles, which is according to the gospel of the glory of God, ministers the healthy teaching as the supply of life to people, either nourishing them or healing them; in contrast, the different teachings of the dissenting ones (v. 3) sow the seeds of death and poison into others. Any teaching that distracts people from the center and goal of God’s New Testament economy is not healthy. (Recovery Version, 1 Tim. 1:10, note 1)

Apart from the economy of God, which is the dispensing of the divine life of the Triune God, the apostles’ teaching would be mere words. Being sourced in the economy of God, however, the teachings of the apostles are words that nourish and build up the church, the Body of Christ (1 Tim. 4:6). No book in the New Testament so clearly reveals the intrinsic relationship between the economy of God and the apostles’ teaching as the book of Ephesians. Throughout the course of its six chapters, Paul repeatedly, yet almost hiddenly, underscores the reality of the economy of God as the organic source, the organic content, and the organic issue of the teaching of the apostles. Paul’s view of the apostles’ teaching provides some much needed sobriety to today’s Christianity, which is heaped up with teachers who seemingly have little knowledge of or care for the whole counsel of God (Acts 20:27), choosing instead to tickle the itching ears and cater to the lusts of believers who have little appetite for the healthy teaching (2 Tim. 4:3).

Paul’s Teaching in Ephesians: Revelation, Riches, and the Church

In every chapter in the book of Ephesians, Paul implicitly, if not explicitly, refers to the source, the content, or the goal of the apostles’ teaching. In 3:3-11, however, he clearly speaks of all three in a sequence that matches both God’s operation in the divine economy and our experience of the divine economy.

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

Catering to Itching Ears

The tenor of late twentieth-century American Christianity is remarkably self-indulgent and self-absorbed. When, for example, fellowship with God is judged by the size of one’s wallet, when prayers for debt reduction take precedence over prayers that advance God’s kingdom, and when the healing power of the Spirit is enlisted for the purpose of obtaining gold dental fillings, can there be much doubt that the state of the church has become utterly degraded? This is the age of Laodicea (Rev. 3:14-22). Indeed the Lord is standing outside the door of the church (v. 20), not the door of unbelievers’ hearts, and He is knocking, hoping that some will open to Him and let Him come in and make His home in their hearts (Eph. 3:17).

Too many ministries cater to this wave of self-indulgence and self-absorption—promising to make believers physically healthy, personally wealthy, and even “prophetically” wise, enabling them to escape any personal discomfort, even during the “coming” apocalypse. These ministries encourage the preservation of the self, rather than the denial of the self. They present neither the cross nor Jesus Christ crucified (1 Cor. 2:2). Instead, persuasive words of wisdom, often taking the form of human psychology that has been suitably “Christianized” with a smattering of Bible verses, are standard fare. Whether or not one is a good minister of Christ Jesus, however, is altogether determined by what is laid before the brothers (1 Tim. 4:6). A true minister has no commission other than to speak the words of this life (Acts 5:20), and any goal other than this, no matter how much it seems to be validated with membership numbers and physical assets, is but wood, grass, and stubble (1 Cor. 3:12).

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, in order that now to the rulers and the authorities in the heavenlies the multifarious wisdom of God might be made known through the *church*, according to the eternal purpose which He made in Christ Jesus our Lord. (emphasis added)

The sequence is encapsulated in the words *revelation*, *riches*, and *church*. In the economy of God, revelation is the source, the unsearchable riches of Christ are the content, and the church, the Body of Christ, is the goal of the apostles' teaching.

The source of Paul's teaching in Ephesians was not his extensive knowledge of the Scriptures, the speaking of God which we now know as the Old Testament, or even his Pharisaical training (Acts 26:5; Phil. 3:5). His religious knowledge and training, rather than assisting him to know God, actually hindered him from being brought into the economy of God, into an organic union with the living Christ (vv. 7-9). Apart from God's mercy in the removing of his veils, in His unveiling of Christ as the mystery of God, Paul would have remained in darkness, being blinded by the god of this age (2 Cor. 4:4). But God is rich in mercy, and it pleases Him to reveal His Son in humanity (Eph. 2:4; Gal. 1:16).

Revelation is the shining of God as divine light (1 John 1:5), and it occurs within the sphere of His economical activity to impart Himself as the treasure of divine life into earthen vessels of humanity (2 Cor. 4:7). Receiving revelation is not an experience that is limited to a special class of believers. It is the initial experience of every genuine believer, just as it was the experience of one who persecuted the church of God excessively and ravaged it (Gal. 1:13). Given his background, Paul, truthfully and without false humility, characterized himself as being less than the least of all saints (Eph. 3:8). God reveals His Son in all the believers, qualifying them for a share of the allotted portion of the saints in the light (Col. 1:12). The gospel brings life and incorruption to light (Eph. 1:13; 2 Tim. 1:10); it portrays Jesus, presents Jesus, and imparts Jesus (Gal. 3:1; 2 Cor. 4:4-7).⁴ The proof of His impartation is faith, which is the faith of Christ (Rom. 3:22).

This faith refers to the faith of Jesus Christ in us, which has

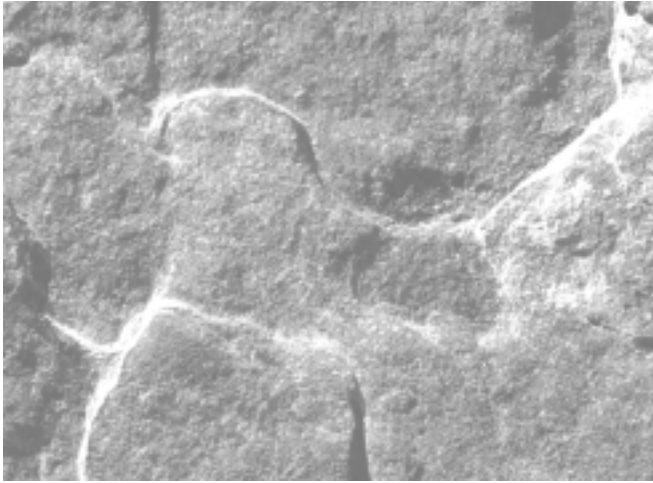
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become the faith by which we believe in Him....Faith has an object, and it issues from its object. This object is Jesus, who is God incarnate. When man hears Him, knows Him, appreciates Him, and treasures Him, He causes faith to be generated in man, enabling man to believe in Him. Thus, He becomes the faith in man by which man believes in Him. Hence, this faith becomes the faith in Him, and it is also the faith that belongs to Him....Faith brings its object, that is, this One who is God incarnate, into those who believe in Him. He is God's righteousness, and God has given Him as righteousness to those who are indwelt by Him (Jer. 23:6). All this is out of, and depends on, the faith that is in Him and of Him (Heb. 12:2). (Recovery Version, Rom. 3:22, note 1)

Revelation is the beginning of our experience of the economy of God, and it is the source of the teaching of the apostles. When the mystery of Christ was revealed to Paul, it was revealed in his human spirit that had been regenerated and indwelt by the Holy Spirit (Eph. 3:5). The spirit spoken of in this verse

can be considered the mingled spirit, the human spirit mingled with God's Spirit. Such a mingled spirit is the means by which the New Testament revelation concerning Christ and the church is revealed to the apostles and prophets. We need the same kind of spirit to see such a revelation. (Recovery Version, note 3)

The proof of Paul's apostleship was the revelation he received. By outward appearances, his bodily presence was weak and his speaking contemptible (2 Cor. 10:10). Despite his lack of physical stature and eloquence, there was weight and strength in his letters, which Peter regarded as Scripture (2 Pet. 3:15-16), because they contained the essence of the divine revelation. Paul did not receive disjointed insight into the things of Christ or random "words" from the Lord; rather, he received a full revelation of the mystery of Christ in God's New Testament economy and, thus, was able to complete the word of God (Col.



The content of the apostles' teaching is not a set of doctrines; it is Christ Himself in His unsearchable riches (Eph. 3:8). Paul received a revelation of God's desire to impart Himself as life to man, and in his teaching, he imparted the Christ whom he had received, experienced, and enjoyed. He also enlightened all concerning this economy. His ministry was not a "renewal" ministry, a "healing" ministry, a "prophetic" ministry, or a "praise" ministry, but rather a stewardship of grace. He ministered as a steward what he had received as revelation. He received Christ as grace in his mingled human spirit, and he dispensed the Christ whom he had received. The stewardship of grace which was given to him was not for his personal edification, but for the building up of the Body of Christ (v. 2; Col. 1:25).

1:25). His revelation was his entrance to the believers (1 Thes. 1:9; 2:1), and it was the basis of his commission as an apostle (Eph. 3:7-9). The meaning of the word *apostle* in Greek denotes one who has been sent. An apostle is not a member of a specially trained class of believers, but simply one who has been sent by God to carry out His commission, according to His granted revelation (1:17). There is no qualification for ministry other than revelation because grace cannot be imparted to others if one has not received a stewardship of grace through revelation. Without revelation, there may be learning, even incessant learning, but no advancement toward the full knowledge of the truth, which is the reality that is present in the economy of God (2 Tim. 3:7). When Paul received a revelation of the resurrected Christ, his teaching began to convey the reality of the resurrected Christ as its intrinsic content.

The intrinsic content of God's New Testament economy is Christ, who can be dispensed into the believers as grace, having passed through the process of incarnation, human living, death, and resurrection. On God's side there is an economy, but on man's side there is a stewardship, and in both Christ, as grace, is the focal point of the divine transmission that is to us from God (Rom. 1:7; 1 Cor. 1:3; 2 Cor. 1:2; Gal. 1:3; Eph. 1:2; Phil. 1:2; Col. 1:2). The relationship between economy and stewardship can be seen in the shared Greek root for *stewardship* in Ephesians 3:2 and *economy* in 1:10 and 3:9.

In relation to God, this word denotes God's economy, God's administration; in relation to the apostle, it denotes the stewardship (*stewardship* is used also in 1 Cor. 9:17). The stewardship of the grace is for the dispensing of the

"What you see write in a scroll and send it to the seven churches"

A part from the questionable practice of denominational ordination as one's qualification for ministry, there is a growing and disturbingly facile trend toward "self-investiture" with the "credentials" of ministry. These "credentials" proclaim one to be an "anointed teacher," another to be an "anointed minister," and still another to be an "anointed apostle." It is clear from the Word, however, that many works which are thought to be done in the Lord's name will not be so appraised by the Lord at His judgment seat (Matt. 7:22-23). The addition of the word *anointed* to the "credentials" of so many self-proclaimed workers is a strong indication that the ability to elicit strong, emotive reactions from an audience through eloquent, powerful speaking is viewed as being at least as important as the content of one's speaking. Given the prevailing practice of such forms of "teaching" and "worship," there is a considerable danger that much of today's Christian teaching comes from souls that are religiously inclined, rather than from spirits that have been exercised unto godliness (1 Tim. 4:7).

There is an undeniable principle in Christian experience: flesh touches flesh, soul touches soul, and spirit touches spirit. Speaking a powerful message from the soul, at best, touches only the soul of those who hear. Often the "spiritual uplifting" that one experiences at such meetings barely lasts as long as it takes to drive home, and there is a continual need to be similarly "pumped up." There is no eternal value in such messages. Our appearance at the judgment seat of Christ is a somber matter. It is difficult to imagine the Lord being at all impressed with such credentials, especially if one's "anointed" work has stumbled others more than built up the Body of Christ. It would be helpful to heed the admonition that was given to the apostle John (Rev. 1:10-11; 4:2; 17:3; 21:10)—to only send to the churches what we have truly seen, that which has been imparted by a revelation of Christ in our mingled, human spirit.

grace of God to His chosen people for the producing and building up of the church. Out of this stewardship comes the ministry of the apostle, who is a steward in God's house, ministering Christ as God's grace to God's household.

Grace refers to the riches of Christ (v. 8), which God has given to us in Christ for us to gain and enjoy. Paul's ministry was to dispense the riches of Christ as grace to the believers for their enjoyment. (Recovery Version, Eph. 3:2, notes 2 and 3)

In his teaching Paul had no content other than Christ as grace. His teaching matched and conveyed the content of God's economy. Only teaching that conveys Christ can be regarded as the healthy teaching that is according to godliness (1 Tim. 6:3). If anything other than Christ is conveyed, even such things as visible displays of spiritual power, there is not an advance toward the goal of God's economy.⁵

Ephesians 3:3-11 shows that the goal of Paul's teaching was in complete accord with God's economy. Paul ministered the riches of Christ and enlightened all concerning the economy of the mystery *in order that* the eternal purpose of God, which He purposed in Himself, could be fulfilled. This purpose is the building up of the church as the Body of Christ so that there is a universal expression of the multifarious wisdom of God through the church (vv. 10-11). God is not seeking an outward acknowledgment of His wise acts from creatures whose only gratitude is for salvation from eternal perdition. Rather, He desires to display the Christ who has been revealed through revelation and imparted as grace into the Body of Christ. It is Christ who is the wisdom of God (1 Cor. 1:30). God's grand design and divine intention are displayed through the church, as Christ progressively builds the believers into a corporate expression of Himself through the dispensing of the divine life into our human spirit based on righteousness, into our soul through sanctification, and ultimately into our body through the redemption of our body. Any ministry that has a different goal than this is not in accord with the apostles' teaching. Much may be "built up," but not much will withstand the fire of Christ's coming judgment.⁶

The Economy of God in Ephesians: The Source of Paul's Teaching

The organic relationship between the economy of God and Paul's teaching, so succinctly seen in Ephesians 3:3-11, is also spoken of in other significant passages in Ephesians. In chapters one and three, Paul speaks of the economy of God as the source of his teaching at the inception of his ministry. In chapter four, he speaks of the economy of God in the constitution of his ministry, and in chapter six, he speaks of the economy of God as his continuing source of

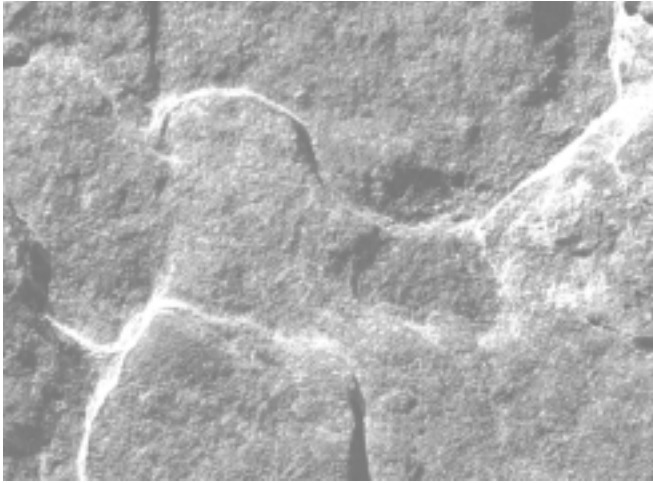
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spiritual supply. God's economy is the dispensing of the Triune God, and Paul fully recognized his dependence upon the Triune God as the organic source of his healthy teaching.

In chapter one, he establishes an organic link between the riches of grace and the apostles' teaching which causes the riches to abound (vv. 7-8). When the mystery of His will is made known through revelation, the riches of His grace begin to abound in all wisdom and prudence, and the economy of God, which began as the fountainhead of the apostles' teaching, begins to operate through the apostles' teaching unto the fullness of the times to head up all things in Christ (vv. 9-10). Unless the mystery of the Triune God's will is made known through the apostles' teaching, it is not possible for the Father's selection and predestination (vv. 3-6), the Son's redemption (vv. 7-12), and the Spirit's sealing and pledging (vv. 13-14) to be practically applied.⁷ The phrase *making known to us the mystery of His will* points not only to the transmission in the divine economy between Paul and the believers (v. 9), but also to the transmission in the divine economy between the Triune God and Paul. When the mystery of Christ was revealed to Paul (3:3), he began to be constituted with the riches of Christ, and his teaching caused the riches of this Christ to abound to others. When the riches abound, God's economy operates to head up the members of the Body of Christ (1:10).⁸

The abounding riches of Christ as grace also are the means for constituting the gifts which Christ gives to His Body. Paul became a minister according to the gift of the grace of God which was given to him in the operation of the economy of God (3:7).

The grace of God is God Himself, especially as life, partaken of and enjoyed by us; the gift of grace is the ability and function produced out of the enjoyment of the grace of God. Grace implies life, and the gift is the ability that comes out of life. (Recovery Version, note 2)



Paul's apostleship was not based on natural ability; instead, it was the issue of the gift of grace. And his functioning as an apostle was not based on natural strength; instead, grace was given according to the measure of the gift of Christ (4:7, 11).

Grace actually is the divine life that produces and supplies the gifts. In Rom. 12 it is the grace that produces the gift. Hence, the gift is according to grace. Here the grace is according to the gift, according to the measure of the gift. (Recovery Version, Eph. 4:7, note 2)

As a believer, Paul entered into the operation of the divine economy, which operated in him in power (Col. 1:29), by receiving and partaking of grace. This grace constituted him as a gift to the Body, and as an apostle, Paul remained in the divine economy, receiving grace for the carrying out of his apostleship. By the grace of God, Paul was what he was, and even though he labored more abundantly than all, it was the grace that labored (1 Cor. 15:10). When he labored in word and teaching, either in his constitution or conduct as a gift (1 Tim. 5:17; 2 Cor. 1:12; 1 Thes. 2:7-10), the economy of God was his source.

It is a labor to teach, to make known in boldness, the mystery of the gospel. Even with his thorough understanding of the counsel of God, Paul never lost sight of his need to remain in the economy of God so that utterance would be given to him in the opening of his mouth (Eph. 6:19). Utterance refers to more than just speaking that comes from preparation, knowledge, and even memory; it refers to words not taught by human wisdom but to words taught by the Spirit, to the interpretation of spiritual things with spiritual words (1 Cor. 2:13). It refers more to the instant teaching of the Holy Spirit who reminds us of the things of Christ (John 14:26). After nearly thirty years of ministry, Watchman Nee spoke of this matter in *The Ministry of God's Word*.

It is very easy for a spiritual word to degenerate into some-

thing outward and physical. Spiritual words must be kept alive in the Holy Spirit before they have an effect on us. Words of revelation must be kept alive in the Holy Spirit before we can derive benefit from them. If a word of revelation is not nurtured in the Holy Spirit, a person can remember the words without remembering the revelation....A man must not only know the revelation of the Holy Spirit, but this revelation must be enriched continually. (233, 236)

Paul realized the need for this continual enrichment for his speaking, and so even after penning what is generally considered the highest revelation in the New Testament, he still implored the saints for their prayer that he would be supplied with spiritual utterance to convey the spiritual realities of the mystery of the gospel. When considering the source of his teaching, Paul took nothing for granted. In every stage of his ministry, including its initiation when the mystery was made known to him (Eph. 1:9; 3:3), its constitution when he received both the gift of grace and grace according to the gift (3:7; 4:7), or its declaration when he relied upon the continual supply of spiritual words to utter the contents of the mystery (6:19), the economy of God was the source of his teaching and his work.

The Economy of God in Ephesians: The Content of Paul's Teaching

With the economy of God as the ever-present source of his teaching, Paul also makes some significant references to the content of his ministry in Ephesians. In chapter one, his speaking conveys the sealing Spirit. In chapter two, his speaking is the application of the peace which Christ accomplished on the cross, and in chapter four, his speaking is linked with the believers' experience of the reality of Christ's human living.

In the stewardship of grace, the divine speaking imparts the divine element. Words, especially when they are sourced in the economy of God, have the capacity to give grace and to build up (4:29). When Paul spoke the word of the truth, the gospel of our salvation, there was a twofold response. From the side of the elect, there was believing, and from God's side, there was a sealing with the Holy Spirit of the promise (1:13), that is, the Spirit, as the consummation of the divine economy, was applied to the believers. Just as God's speaking brought the old creation into existence, His speaking, the teaching of the apostles, brings the new creation into existence in the experience of the believers.

The new creation is the new man in Christ (Eph. 4:24), who was created in Him on the cross (2:15-16). The new man, being the Body of Christ, is an intrinsic component of the economy of God, having been made possible

through the incarnation, death, and resurrection of Christ. In incarnation, God was manifested in the flesh, and in death, the flesh with all of its negative components was crucified. In Ephesians, Paul specifically emphasizes the crucifixion and abolishment of some key elements in the world which frustrate the producing of the Body of Christ, namely the law of the commandments in ordinances and the enmity created by them (vv. 14-15). In resurrection, the peace created in Christ between Jews and Gentiles on the cross was applied in the coming of Christ as the Spirit who preached peace as the gospel (v. 17). The peace created by the Son is applied by the Spirit through the preaching of the apostles' teaching, which is the gospel. The announcing of peace is the impartation of the One who is our peace (v. 14), and this enables us to have access in one Spirit unto the Father (v. 18). Oneness—with the Triune God and with one another in the Body of Christ—is a reality that was created on the cross and applied by the speaking Spirit through the apostles' teaching.

The teaching of the apostles also brings the believers into the reality of the pattern of the human living that is in Jesus. This confirms that the content of Paul's ministry was the Christ of God's economy. In Ephesians 4:20-21 Paul speaks of our learning Christ and of our being taught in Him as the reality is in Jesus through our hearing of Christ.

Christ is not only life to us but also an example (John 13:15; 1 Pet. 2:21). In His life on earth He set up a pattern, as revealed in the Gospels. Then He was crucified and resurrected to become the life-giving Spirit that He might enter into us to be our life. We learn from Him (Matt. 11:29) according to His example, not by our natural life but by Him as our life in resurrection. To learn Christ is simply to be molded into the pattern of Christ, that is, to be conformed to the image of Christ (Rom. 8:29).

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. 20, note 1 and v. 21, note 1)

In order for us to be molded and conformed to the reality of Jesus' human living, there is the need for the apostles' teaching to convey this reality to us. Having heard Him in the apostles' teaching, we have learned Christ by being put into Christ (1 Cor. 1:30), by being baptized into Christ (Rom. 6:3; Gal. 3:27). This enables us to put on the new man, which was created according to God in righteousness

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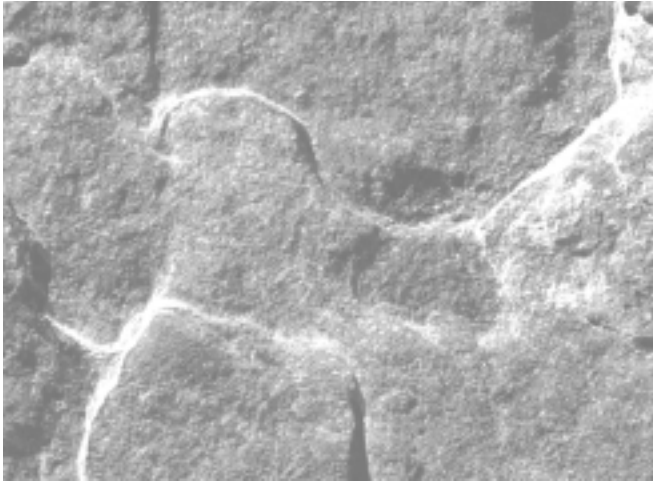
and holiness of the reality, according to the image of Him who created him (Eph. 4:24; Col. 3:10). It is the apostles' teaching that brings the reality into us through the proclamation of the word of the faith. The word that is near us, in our mouths and in our hearts, is the word of the faith which has been proclaimed to us by the apostles' teaching (Rom. 10:8).

*The Economy of God in Ephesians:
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The word of the apostles' teaching operates to bring the believers into the goal of the economy of God. Ephesians presents the church in seven aspects—the Body (1:22-23), the new man (2:15), the family, the kingdom (v. 19), the dwelling place (v. 22), the bride (5:25-32), and the warrior (6:10-18)—as the goal of God's economy. There is a direct connection between the apostles' teaching and the realization of the church in each of these aspects,⁹ but no aspect is more organic than the church as the Body of Christ. The church as the Body of Christ is the highest issue of the economy of God, and in chapter four Paul shows the operation of the apostles' teaching in the building up of the Body of Christ, according to the principles of the Body of Christ. The fidelity of his teaching to the goal of our economical God is clearly demonstrated in verses 11 through 13, which say,

And He Himself gave some as apostles and some as prophets and some as evangelists and some as shepherds and teachers, for the perfecting of the saints unto the work of the ministry, unto the building up of the Body of Christ, until we all 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.

In the economy of God, the descension of Christ into the lower parts of the earth in death and the ascension of Christ in resurrection were not only part of the process of redemption but also part of the process of leading captive



those taken captive and giving some as gifts back to the Body (vv. 8-9, 11). Paul was a gift, being a prisoner of the Lord and in the Lord (3:1; 4:1). Gifts are persons with particular functions, not innate capacities, who have been constituted according to the gift of grace to the point that their function determines the grace that is given (v. 7). These gifts are apostles, prophets, evangelists, and shepherds and teachers (v. 11). “According to the grammatical construction, *shepherds and teachers* refers to a single class of gifted persons. A shepherd should know how to teach, and a teacher should be able to shepherd” (Recovery Version, Eph. 4:11, note 2). These four kinds of gifts all function in relation to the apostles’ teaching: apostles are sent with the word of God’s economy and make it known; rather than just speaking of future events, prophets speak for God and even speak forth God; evangelists speak the apostles’ teaching as the gospel; and shepherds nourish and cherish by teaching the healthy words of the apostles’ teaching.¹⁰

With the apostles’ teaching as the content of their speaking, the gifts perfect the saints. *Perfecting* means “equipping, supplying the functions” (Recovery Version, Eph. 4:12, note 1). Perfecting does not involve outward adjustment and correction; it is the ability in life to bring the believers into an organic function within the Body so that the ministry of life can flow into them and through them into the other members of the Body. Those who claim to be apostles, prophets, evangelists, or shepherds and teachers may speak many scriptural things, but if their work does not bring believers into organic function, not just activity, they are not gifts, no matter the size or “impact” of their “ministry.” It is quite easy to incite believers to be temporarily active in a “work for the Lord,” but true function comes out of life; it is not something that dissipates with time, something that can be displaced when newer and more exciting activities present themselves, nor is it something that evaporates in challenging environments. Even in the confines of prison, a shepherd will find a way to shepherd others, even if it is just one person or “the whole Praetorian guard” (Phil.

1:13). Even in the confines of prison, a teacher will find a way to teach, even if the teaching can be committed only to writing on urgently requested parchments (2 Tim. 4:13). And even in the confines of prison, when there is no freedom to be sent, an apostle will accept his sending to prison as from God and gain those around him, even those of Caesar’s household (Phil. 4:22).

Those who are in line with the apostles’ teaching bring the saints into organic function because they know that the work of the ministry is carried out by perfected saints, not just gifts. The perfecting of the saints is *unto* the work of the ministry, and when the saints function—with some serving as joints of the rich supply and with others being sensitive to the operation in the measure of their unique, one part—the Body builds itself up in love (Eph. 4:16). “The building up of the Body of Christ is the work of the ministry....However, this building up is not accomplished directly by the gifted ones but by the saints who have been perfected by the gifted ones” (Recovery Version, Eph. 4:12, note 4). The issue of the apostles’ teaching is the organic, functioning Body of Christ, which is also the issue of the economy of God. The apostles’ teaching does not equip the believers with just doctrines, even doctrines that cut straight the word of the truth (2 Tim. 2:15); it equips them to participate in the economy of God by functioning according to the divine life so that the issue of the economy of God can be realized. In many respects the goal of God’s economy is intrinsically a part of the process of reaching God’s economy; that is, the organic, functioning Body will be produced and consummated through the organic functioning of the members of the Body.

In the members of the Body, there is a function, an expression of the divine life, that is spontaneous, persistent, and necessary for the fulfillment of the economy of God: prayer. Prayer, more than anything, indicates whether or not the economy of God is the source, content, and issue of the teaching that informs and motivates our Christian living.


Paul’s Prayer in Ephesians 3:14-21

Paul’s prayer in Ephesians 3:14-21 is the highest proof that the economy of God is the source, content, and issue of his teaching.¹¹ Paul speaks of the process of God’s economy in 3:3-11, but he demonstrates the reality of God’s economy in his prayer in this same chapter. Paul is so burdened that the saints would see and experience the reality of his teaching that he metaphorically sets aside his writing instrument and prays for the saints to experience God’s economy. Acknowledging the Triune God as the source, he bows his knee to the Father and prays that Christ would make His home in our hearts through the strengthening of the Spirit. Paul involves the Triune God in his prayer, providing a channel for Him to operate in His economy; he does

not just salutatorily address the Father or benedictorily invoke the name of the Son.

Realizing that Christ must head up all things and fill all things and that the Body must grow up into Him in all things (1:10; 4:10, 15), Paul prays for Christ to make His home in our hearts through faith (3:17); he does not pray for things that can be seen. Knowing that the Body is the goal of God's economy, Paul prays that the saints would be rooted and grounded in love (v. 17), the environment necessary for the building up of the Body of Christ (4:16), and would be strong to apprehend the length, the breadth, the height and the depth of Christ with all the saints (3:18); he does not pray for things that are passing away. All the saints, each functioning according to the operation of their measured part, are needed for Christ to be expressed in His fullest dimensions, which is the fullness of God (v. 19). Anticipating the fulfillment of God's economy, Paul concludes his prayerful utterance with hope, fully realizing that the eternally Triune God, out of the eternal desire of His heart, will reach the goal of His eternal plan and produce glory in the church and in Christ Jesus (v. 21).

The Apostles' Teaching

The economy of God is the source, content, and issue of the apostles' teaching, and no other book in the Bible more clearly demonstrates this than Ephesians, both in explicit utterance and in prayer. There is an organic relationship between the economy of God and the teaching of the apostles: The organic link is the Triune God Himself. The economy of God is the Triune God; it is God actively coming to man. And the teaching of the apostles is the economy of God being carried out in all wisdom and prudence, applying and imparting the Triune God into the saints for the building up of the Body of Christ. Our Triune God is a God of life. And in His infinite love, He desires to impart Himself as life and make known the riches of His glory upon vessels of mercy. Rather than just knowing about Him through the teaching of the apostles, He is made known to us and in us through the teaching of the apostles. 

Notes

¹See Kerry S. Robichaux's "Axioms of the Trinity," *Affirmation & Critique* I.1 (January 1996): 6-11, and "A Prolegomenon to a Hermeneutic of the Bible according to the Intrinsic Being of God," *Affirmation & Critique* IV.3 (July 1999): 3-14, for a fuller development of these points.

²The process of the incarnation, death, and resurrection of the Son was necessary to satisfy the demands of God's righteousness, holiness, and glory on our behalf. This aspect of our salvation is primarily judicial in nature; without the satisfaction

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of God's righteous requirement, God would have been limited to condemning as enemies those who only could be reconciled to Him by the death of His Son. The Spirit's regeneration and indwelling is necessary to satisfy the desire of God for an enlarged expression of His Son through many sons. This aspect of our salvation is primarily organic in nature; without the operation of the divine life God would not have the means to shepherd, sanctify, renew, transform, build up, conform, and glorify those who are no longer alienated from the life of God.

³The economy of God as a hypostatic expression of the Triune God is suggested and briefly explored in an earlier article on the economy of God in Ephesians, "The Economy of Grace and Glory in Ephesians," in *Affirmation & Critique* IV.1 (Jan. 1999): 31-42.

⁴There is an important link between hearing and seeing in the economy of God. May we not be those in whom the prophecy of Isaiah is fulfilled, which says,

In hearing you shall hear and by no means understand, and seeing you shall see and by no means perceive. For the heart of this people has become fat, and with their ears they have heard heavily, and their eyes they have closed, lest they perceive with their eyes and hear with their ears and understand with their heart, and they turn around, and I will heal them. (Matt. 13:14-15)

⁵Is anything really accomplished, for example, in casting out demons in the Lord's name if, after removing the demons, the inward being of the person is swept, decorated, unoccupied, and empty of Christ? Truly, the latter state of this person will be worse than the first (Matt. 12:43-45). Sadly, this is the case with many believers who are being carried along in the course of this evil religious age in which God's economy is neither the content nor the goal of many ministries.

⁶It is not enough to just know and repeat Paul's words. Every believer must be willing to honestly open to the Lord's searching eyes and ask, "What do I see of God's eternal purpose? Do I impart and convey Christ in His unsearchable riches? And

what is the goal of my work?" Such questions, honestly asked of the Lord in His presence, will enable Him to fully illuminate our inner being and fundamentally calibrate us according to His economy. Without such honesty, our works may produce "rewards," but they will be our "reward in full," that is, only we will benefit from them. This "benefit" will not last, however, when the judgment comes (Matt. 6:2, 5).

⁷The sequence in Ephesians 1 is repeated in Romans 10 when Paul speaks of our enjoyment of Christ through calling on His name:

For there is no distinction between Jew and Greek, for the same Lord is Lord of all and rich to all who call upon Him; for "whoever calls upon the name of the Lord shall be saved." How then shall they call upon Him into whom they have not believed? And how shall they believe into Him of whom they have not heard? And how shall they hear without one who proclaims Him? And how shall they proclaim Him unless they are sent? As it is written, "How beautiful are the feet of those who announce the news of good things!" (vv. 12-15)

The Lord is indeed rich to all who call on Him, but our calling, our enjoying of our rich Christ, issues forth from hearing and believing the word which has been proclaimed by those who are sent.

⁸If the members of the Body are not being headed up, it would be a mistake to claim that the teachings they are receiving bear the mark of the apostles' teaching, no matter how much they appear to be powerful, anointed, or Spirit-filled. It is easy to mistake emotion for power, but it is impossible to mistake a life that is being lived according to the course of this age for one that is being headed up in Christ in every aspect. It is easy to say that we have gained Christ, but it is much more difficult to demonstrate that Christ has gained us because the latter requires that we allow Christ to make His home in our hearts with His preferences becoming our preferences, His thoughts our thoughts, and His choices our choices.

⁹In addition to the Body (1:22-23), which builds itself up in love through the divine speaking and perfection of the apostles, prophets, evangelists, and shepherds and teachers, Ephesians reveals an organic link between the apostles' teaching and the realization of the church in each of the six remaining aspects. For the new man to be practically displayed (2:15), there is the need for the work of Christ on the cross to be announced and imparted, and there is the need for humanity out of every tribe, tongue, people, and nation to be purchased for God (Rev. 5:9). When peace as the gospel is announced through the apostles' teaching, both needs are met. For the family life and the kingdom life to be expressed (Eph. 2:19), there is the need for access unto the Father, who is the source of life, and this access is the issue of the coming of Christ as our peace through the gospel. For the dwelling place of God to be built up (v. 22), there is the need for the foundation of the revelation of the mystery of Christ, which is the speaking of the apostles and prophets (v. 20). For the bride to be adorned and made ready (5:25-32),

there is the need for the washing of the water in the word, the instant speaking of the Spirit, which is confirmed and validated by its correspondence to the teaching of the apostles, the Scriptures. For the warrior to fight for God's interests on this earth, exercising dominion over the enemy (6:10-18), there is the need for the sword of the Spirit, which Spirit is the word of God. This is the constant word of the Bible, the teaching of the apostles, becoming the instant word. "When the constant word in the Bible becomes the instant word, that word is the Spirit as the sword that kills the enemy" (Recovery Version, 6:17, note 4).

¹⁰Prophesying, whether in the New Testament age or in the Old Testament dispensation, has always involved three aspects: speaking for God, speaking forth God, and, in a limited sense, speaking of the future. Most of the prophesying in the Old Testament dispensation consisted of speaking for God. In the New Testament age, however, the emphasis has shifted to speaking forth God, especially in the meetings of the called-out ones, for the building up of the Body of Christ. Through the steps of Christ in His incarnation, human living, death, and resurrection, the Triune God has been dispensed into redeemed humanity and can be dispensed in our speaking to one another, especially when our utterances match and convey the content of the apostles' teaching. It is a shame that the principal connotation of prophesying in our time is that of speaking of the future, a speaking which often is reminiscent of Old Testament forms and even Old Testament content. Grandiose declarations of "Thus saith the Lord" routinely precede "prophetic announcements" in utter disregard for the fact that God no longer speaks in many portions and in many ways as He did to the fathers in the prophets. He is now speaking in the Son (Heb. 1:2), the Son who has been consummated as the Spirit and enlarged in His organic Body. Moses' expression of God's desire—"Oh that all Jehovah's people were prophets, that Jehovah would put His Spirit upon them!"—has become a reality in the New Testament age because His Spirit is mingled with our spirit and "you can all prophesy" (Num. 11:29; 1 Cor. 6:17; 14:31).

¹¹The real content of a particular teaching often can be clearly discerned in the content of the prayers that it generates. Greedy prayers, even lustful prayers, for example, often are the product of prosperity teachings. What we pray for is our goal. For example, if we pray only for mammon in its various forms, can we say that our goal is really anything other than mammon? Out of the abundance of our heart, the mouth speaks and prays. Prayers like Paul uttered in Ephesians 3:14-21 are not heard much in today's Christianity. As such, how much of the teaching in today's Christianity is really in line with the apostles' teaching?

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