

THE STEWARDSHIP OF THE GRACE OF GOD

BY JAMES FITE

When surveying lists of recent Christian bestsellers, it would seem that the word *stewardship* in its modern usage is mostly an euphemism for reaching for the checkbook to either open it or protect it. A few of these titles go deeper, equating stewardship to the prudent management of time and other limited resources. These popular concepts, however, could not be further afield from Paul's usage of the term *stewardship*, especially when he connects it with the phrase *the grace of God* as in Ephesians 3:2.

The word *grace*, when used in a religious context, commonly connotes God's unmerited favor, a concept that is far short of the New Testament's revelation concerning grace. Hence, a more complete understanding of the term *grace* is also required in order to see, in the light of God's Word, the real significance and present application of Paul's phrase *the stewardship of the grace of God*.

The Context of Ephesians 3:2

In verses 2 and 3 Paul connects the stewardship (οἰκονομίαν) given to him with the mystery being made known to him. Verse 4 indicates that this mystery is "of Christ." According to verse 6, the mystery of Christ made known to Paul is that "in Christ Jesus the Gentiles are fellow heirs and fellow members of the Body and fellow partakers of the promise through the gospel." Hence, the mystery of Christ relates to the church as the Body of Christ, which Body comprises the Jews and the Gentiles (cf. 2:14-16). In verse 7 of chapter 3 Paul mentions again "the grace of God," saying that he became a minister of the gospel "according to the gift of the grace of God."

This second mention of the grace of God refers to a gift given to Paul that enabled him to announce "the unsearchable riches of Christ as the gospel" to the Gentiles and to enlighten all to see the "economy [οἰκονομία] of the mystery" (vv. 8-9). Paul continues in verses 10 and 11, speaking of the wisdom of God, the church, and God's eternal purpose. Hence, the stewardship of the grace of God in verse 2 issues in the accomplishing of God's eternal purpose—the universal display of His multifarious wisdom "through the church" in verse 10.

The Grace of God

Grace is a particular and oft-used word in the New Testament (mentioned over one hundred thirty times). More than a third of these references are found in the introduction and conclusion of each Epistle. Except for James and Jude, the Epistles and Revelation open with a greeting of grace and/or conclude with a commendation of grace. Many New Testament readers may simply overlook these references, considering