

THE ETERNAL PURPOSE WHICH GOD MADE IN CHRIST JESUS CONCERNING THE CHURCH

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The Holy Scriptures reveal that God is a God of eternity. From eternity to eternity He is God—God the Father is eternal, God the Son is eternal, and God the Spirit also is eternal. The Triune God is self-existing and ever-existing, without beginning and without end. He is uncreated, and all His attributes, such as life, love, righteousness, joy, might, power, and glory, are also eternal. The book of Ephesians reveals that this God of eternity is also a God of purpose. Because His purpose was formed in Himself, it is inseparable from His eternal being. Accordingly, *eternal purpose* is a unique expression in Ephesians, underlining the fact that our God is both wondrously eternal and unwavering in His purpose.¹ The eternal purpose which God made in Christ Jesus is a central matter in Ephesians.

God's purpose stems from His eternal being, and the fulfillment of His purpose involves the impartation of His eternal attributes into His chosen people. God's eternal purpose is motivated by His eternal love for His elect and is executed by the dispensing of His eternal life into them to reproduce His eternal glory within them. Further, the realization of God's eternal purpose within the believers is ensured by the operation of His eternal power (Rom. 1:20), the power of His indestructible life, in them (Heb. 7:16). Concerning the fulfillment of His purpose, the eternal God (Isa. 40:28) declared, "Surely just as I conceived it, so has it happened; / And just as I have purposed it, so shall this stand" (14:24).

The various stages and aspects of God's work related to the accomplishment of His purpose are imbued with an eternal quality, for God's purpose is not only sourced in His eternal being but also carried out by the exercise of His eternal attributes. His counsel is unchangeable; His calling of the believers is irrevocable; and His covenant, kingdom, dominion, rule, redemption, and salvation are all eternal (Heb. 6:17; Rom. 11:29; Heb. 13:20; 2 Pet. 1:11; Psa. 145:13; Rev. 22:5; Heb. 9:12; 5:9). In keeping with this thought, a psalmist declares, "The counsel of Jehovah stands forever; / The intentions of His heart stand from generation to generation" (Psa. 33:11). Ultimately, despite the disobedience of man and the scheme of Satan to oppose the purpose of God, nothing and no one can thwart God's eternal purpose, and under God's sovereignty every event and person in the universe are utilized to carry it out (Rom. 8:28; Eph. 1:11).

At its heart the Bible is the revelation of God and His eternal purpose. More than any other book of the Bible, Ephesians is focused on unveiling God's eternal purpose concerning the church as the Body of Christ. According to this Epistle, God's determined intent to impart Himself in His Divine Trinity as the grace of life into His believers is for the producing of the church as the Body of Christ. This fulfills God's original ordination for humanity—to express God in His glorious image and to represent Him with His authority to deal with His enemy (Gen. 1:26).

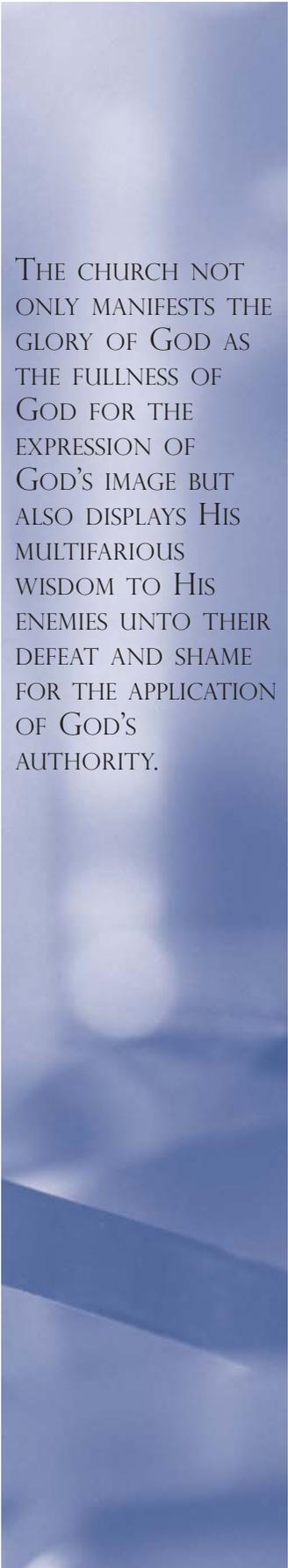
Ephesians 1 introduces this divine intention, unveiling that God's eternal purpose is to impart Himself as life in His Trinity into the believers in order to gain many sons as members of the organic Body of Christ, the church, for His corporate expression and to head up all things in Christ through His Body for the exercise of God's dominion throughout the universe. In Ephesians 3 Paul more fully develops the thought of God's desire to dispense the unsearchable riches of Christ as grace into the believers in order to constitute them as the church, His Body. The church not only manifests the glory of God as the fullness of God for the expression of God's image but also displays His multifarious wisdom to His enemies unto their defeat and shame for the application of God's authority. Ephesians 3 unveils four aspects in which the church as the fulfillment of God's eternal purpose is a corporate and organic issue of the believers' subjective experience of Christ in their organic union with Him: the church is the mystery of Christ, the product of the believers' participation in the riches of Christ, the resulting expression of Christ making His home in the believers' hearts, and a universal display of the unsearchably rich Christ as the manifold wisdom of God constituted into and expressed through the believers.

God's Eternal Purpose in Ephesians 3:2-13

Ephesians 3:2-21 is generally viewed by Bible expositors as an extended parenthesis. This is because Ephesians 4:1, in which Paul writes, "I beseech you therefore, I, the prisoner in the Lord, to walk worthily of the calling with which you were called," is a continuation of the thought in 3:1, which says, "I Paul, the prisoner of Christ Jesus on behalf of you, the Gentiles." Among such expositors, some contend that verses 2 through 13 are a further digression within the larger parenthesis. In *Ephesian Studies: Expository Readings on the Epistle of Saint Paul to the Ephesians*, for example, Handley C. G. Moule concludes that Ephesians 3:1-13 forms "a digression from a main line of thought" in the Epistle (125). The reason for this digression and its function within the wider discourse of the Epistle are the subject of significant debate among commentators. In "Rhetorical Argumentation in the Letter to the Ephesians," Roy R. Jeal asserts that "Ephesians 3:2-13 is a digression in the sequence of thought that provides additional rhetorical force, even if the additions are not crucial to the logic of the epistle" (323).

Other interpreters have attempted to link this passage to their view of the main argument of Ephesians, understanding the passage to be an apostolic defense, as being "an exercise in self-praise" (MacDonald 271), an establishment of Paul's apostolic credentials, or a justification of his unique apostolic authority to the Gentiles. Still other commentators have found verses 1 through 13 to be relevant to the book's primary theme by focusing on the role of Paul's imprisonment in fulfilling God's plan. Aaron Sherwood, for example, posits in "Paul's Imprisonment as the Glory of the Ethnē: A Discourse Analysis of Ephesians 3:1-13" that this passage primarily shows that Paul's imprisonment, defined by his apostleship, "is not a source of shame that undermines God's purposes but rather a source of honor that confirms God's eschatological plan" (97). In "Ephesians 3:2-13: Pointless Digression, or Epitome of the Triumph of God in Christ?" Timothy Gombis similarly claims that the main purpose of this passage is to highlight the paradoxical triumph of God over His enemies through Paul's apparently defeated condition in the midst of imprisonment and afflictions (322-323).

Although interpretations that seek to connect Ephesians 3:2-13 to the central thrust of the Epistle possess certain merits, none of them adequately penetrate the intrinsic significance of Paul's primary concern in this passage related to his commission as a steward of God's grace to announce the unsearchable riches of Christ to the Gentiles and to enlighten all concerning the economy of the hidden mystery for the fulfillment of God's eternal purpose. The intrinsic focus of Ephesians 3:2-13 is the revelation of



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PAUL'S DISCUSSION OF THE CHURCH IS FRAMED WITH A REFERENCE TO THE CULMINATION OF GOD'S ETERNAL PURPOSE. THUS, THE CHURCH IS NOT A MERE BYPRODUCT OF THE REDEMPTION OF CHRIST. INSTEAD, THE CHURCH IS THE GOAL OF GOD'S PURPOSE DETERMINED IN ETERNITY PAST.

the mystery concerning God's eternal purpose, which is to obtain the church, the Body of Christ, by dispensing the riches of Christ into the believers through a stewardship of grace. This understanding not only accounts for the flow of thought of this passage but also corresponds with the subject of the entire Epistle—the church, the Body of Christ, as the fulfillment of God's eternal purpose. Verses 1 through 13, therefore, are not a dispensable digression; they are an integral part of the Epistle, unveiling the mysterious purpose of God to produce the church as the Body of Christ and the stewardship of the grace of God as the means to accomplish this purpose.

The Church—the Goal of God's Eternal Purpose

The narrative climax of Ephesians 3:1-13 is found in verses 10 and 11: "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." In *Paul's Letters from Prison* G. B. Caird identifies 3:10 as a pivotal verse in understanding Ephesians: "It is hardly an exaggeration to say that any interpretation of Ephesians stands or falls with this verse" (66). Immediately before speaking of the eternal purpose that God made in Christ in 3:11, Paul presents the aim of God's ultimate purpose in verse 10: the universal display of the multifarious wisdom of God through the church. Verses 10 and 11 clearly connect God's eternal purpose with Christ and the church. Since Paul's discussion of the church is framed with a reference to the culmination of God's eternal purpose, the church is not a mere byproduct of the redemption of Christ or an afterthought appended to the divine plan due to the need for an external contingency that deals with Satan's rebellion or the consequences of Adam's fall. Instead, the church is the goal of God's purpose determined in eternity past.

Ephesians 1 affirms that the church is the object of God's good pleasure, His heart's desire, which He purposed in Himself from eternity past (vv. 9, 22-23). This is because the church as the Body of Christ is composed of the believers, whom God predestinated unto sonship, before the foundation of the world (that is, in eternity past) according to the good pleasure of His will and according to the purpose of the One who works all things according to the counsel of His will (vv. 5, 11). The purpose of God to gain the church has its source in the good pleasure of His will, that is, the desire of His heart embodied in His will, which was established before the creation of the universe. Long before Satan rebelled against God and became His enemy, and long before sin entered into the human race through Adam's disobedience, God in eternity past affirmed His singular intention to obtain the church for the accomplishment of His great will and for the satisfaction of the profound desire within His heart.

Christ—the Center of God's Eternal Purpose

Whereas the goal of God's eternal purpose is the church, the center of God's purpose is Christ. It is significant that in Ephesians 3:11 Paul emphatically asserts that God made His eternal purpose in Christ Jesus our Lord. In *The New Testament for English Readers* Henry Alford suggests that while the Greek word translated "made" (ἐποίησεν) in 3:11 may be understood to mean "constituted, ordained, purposed," some translators render this word "wrought" and "apply it to the carrying out, executing, in its historical realization" of the eternal purpose of God (1225). This implies that just as God formed His purpose in eternity past in Christ, so also God will accomplish this purpose in time and will consummate it in eternity future in Christ.

Moreover, it is noteworthy that the One in whom God conceived, carries out, and will consummate His ultimate purpose is referred to as Christ Jesus our Lord. First, the title *Christ* refers to the anointed One, the One appointed by God to execute His

eternal purpose. This thought is confirmed by the fact that immediately after Peter declared that Jesus is “the Christ, the Son of the living God,” Jesus revealed His commission to build His church, the universal church as His mystical Body: “I will build My church” (Matt. 16:16-18; Eph. 1:22-23; cf. 4:12-16). Second, the title *Jesus* refers to Christ as a man, implying His incarnation. Third, the title *our Lord* points to the fact that following His death on the cross, His resurrection from the dead, and His ascension to the right hand of God (Acts 2:31-36), the man Jesus was made Lord of all (10:36) to be “the Head of the Body, the church” (Col. 1:18). Thus, God’s desired purpose to bring forth the church is accomplished by the all-inclusive Christ in His person and work, which includes His incarnation, human living, crucifixion, resurrection, ascension, and heavenly ministry. This all-inclusive Christ is the centrality and universality of God’s purpose to gain the church. In other words, God carries out His eternal purpose in Christ as the unique sphere, with Christ as the singular element, and by Christ as the sole means. Apart from Christ, there is no purpose of God, and outside of Christ, God’s purpose cannot be accomplished. It is only in, with, and by Christ that God’s eternal purpose can be fulfilled.

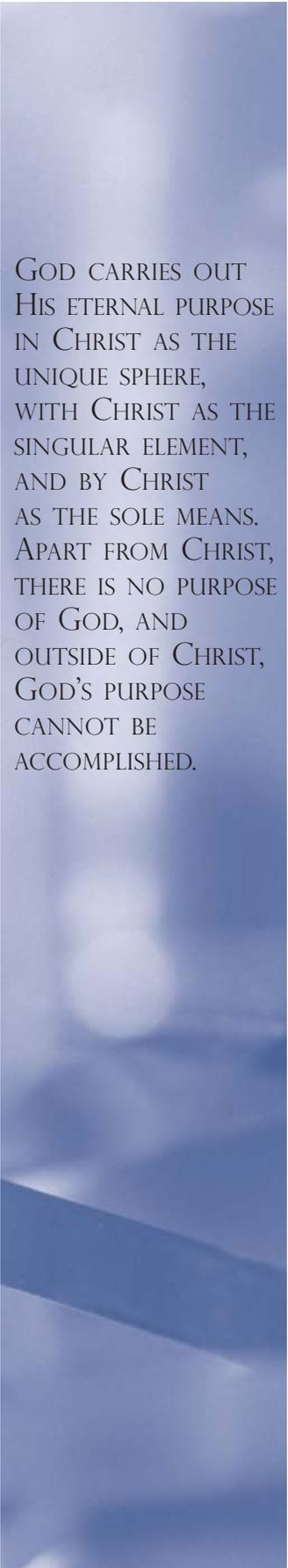
In relation to God’s eternal purpose, the incarnated, crucified, resurrected, and ascended Christ marks the individual, initial fulfillment of God’s desire for image and dominion (Gen. 1:26). With respect to image, Christ in His divinity is the image of God, the manifest expression of the invisible God (2 Cor. 4:4; Col. 1:15); Christ in His incarnation as a God-man manifested God in the flesh, thereby glorifying God on earth (1 Tim. 3:15-16; John 17:4); Christ through His death and resurrection entered into glory (Luke 24:26, 46; John 7:39; 1 Cor. 15:43); and Christ in His ascension was crowned with the glory of God (Heb. 2:9; Rev. 5:12-13).

With respect to dominion, in His incarnation Christ as the Son of God was manifested to destroy the works of the devil, casting out the demons to bring in the kingdom of God (1 John 3:8; Matt. 12:28); in His death He destroyed the devil, casting out the ruler of this world (Heb. 2:14; John 12:31); and in His resurrection and ascension He was invested with all authority in heaven and on earth and was made the Head of the church and the Head of all rule and authority in order to exercise God’s dominion in the church and throughout the created realm (Matt. 28:18; Eph. 5:23; Col. 2:10). By abiding in such a God-expressing and God-representing Christ, the believers participate in the corporate and ultimate fulfillment of God’s purpose made in Christ (John 15:4-5). This will issue in the reality of the Body of Christ, the enlargement of Christ, the corporate expression and representation of God for the consummate fulfillment of God’s eternal desire for image and dominion through humanity in Christ.

The Church—the Mystery of Christ

In Ephesians 3 the centrality of Christ in God’s eternal purpose to gain the church is highlighted by the revelation that the church is the mystery of Christ. In 3:4-6 Paul speaks of “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.”

Although the expression *the mystery of Christ* is certainly related to Christ, the significance of this expression extends beyond the individual Christ to the corporate Christ, the Christ expressed in and through the church, His Body. Shortly after speaking of the mystery of Christ in verse 4, Paul describes in verse 6 the content of this mystery, declaring, “That in Christ Jesus the Gentiles are fellow heirs and fellow members of the Body and fellow partakers of the promise through the gospel.” Henry Alford posits that the word *that* in verse 6 may be translated “namely, that,” “giving the purport of the mystery” (1223). In this view the mystery of Christ in Ephesians 3 refers to the



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Body of Christ composed of the Jewish and Gentile believers in Christ as fellow members, heirs, and partakers of the promise through the gospel.

Paul's understanding that the mystery of Christ is the church is further supported by a striking parallel between verses 4 through 6 and verses 9 through 11. The former portion of verses speaks of the mystery of Christ, a view concerning the Body of Christ that was not made known to the sons of men but has been revealed to His holy apostles and prophets in spirit. The latter portion speaks of the economy of the mystery, which has been hidden in God throughout the ages but now can be seen by those who have been enlightened for the fulfillment of His eternal purpose to display His multifarious wisdom through the church. This suggests that the mystery concerning the divine economy, God's administrative arrangement to carry out His eternal purpose, is intimately tied to God's ultimate intention to gain the church as the Body of Christ. More specifically, the church, the Body of Christ, is a hidden mystery in God's economy, His plan to accomplish His eternal purpose.

In "What the OT Prophets Did Not Know: the Mystery of the Church in Eph 3,2-13" Sigurd Grindheim understands the principal significance of the mystery of Christ to be the unity of Jews and Gentiles in the Body of Christ produced through the "abrogation of the Mosaic law" and the reconciliation of Jews and Gentiles in Christ's death (531, 542, 544-545, 549). However, Grindheim's commentary on Ephesians 3, representative of many other commentaries, falls short of revealing Paul's insight into the vital significance of the Body of Christ as an organism of Christ composed of the believers in union with Christ. In describing the mystery of Christ, Paul states that it is in Christ Jesus that the Jews and the Gentiles are fellow members of the Body (v. 6). Paul's signature expression *in Christ Jesus* refers to the believers' organic union with Christ in the divine life (cf. John 3:16; 1 Cor. 6:17). This implies that the believers' being fellow members of the Body of Christ is predicated upon their organic union with Christ; apart from their life union with Christ, regardless of their race, they cannot be members of the Body (v. 17; 12:27).

Thus, in Paul's concept, the believers' joint participation in the Body of Christ hinges on their incorporation into Christ. This echoes Paul's earlier proclamation in Ephesians 2:15 that Christ created the Jews and the Gentiles in Himself into one new man, His one Body (v. 16). In verse 15 the Greek word translated "in" (*ἐν*) may have an elemental significance, meaning "with," suggesting that the new man, the Body of Christ, was created with Christ as its divine element. Thus, the creation of the one new man, the one Body, required not only the abolishing of the law of the commandments in ordinances, which separated Jews from Greeks, but also the dispensing of Christ as life into the believers, which alone can unite them. By abolishing the ordinances and imparting Himself as life into the believers to initiate an organic union with them, Christ has made the believing Jews and Gentiles fellow members of His one Body for His unique expression.

In Paul's view, it is by virtue of their life union with Christ that the believers are fellow heirs, that is, joint heirs with Christ as heirs of God (Rom. 8:17). The believers' status as heirs of God, which was acquired only through their incorporation into Christ, the unique appointed Heir (Heb. 1:2; cf. John 3:35), points to the fact that their inheritance is the Triune God and all that is of Him. This recalls Paul's statement in Ephesians 1:13-14 that it is in Christ that we, the believers, were sealed with the Holy Spirit as the pledge of our inheritance. The Greek word translated "pledge" (*ἀρραβών*) denotes both a guarantee and a foretaste. This indicates that when we entered into an organic union with Christ through our believing into Him, God gave us His Holy Spirit not only as a guarantee of our special inheritance in God Himself, assuring our full enjoyment of God in eternity, "but also as a foretaste of what we will inherit of God, affording us a taste" of this full inheritance in the present age (Lee,

Recovery Version, v. 14, note 1). The believers can inherit God, that is, enjoy God as their inheritance today, because they are heirs of the grace of life (1 Pet. 3:7), which is the Triune God Himself as life dispensed into the believers for their enjoyment.

In Ephesians 3:2 Paul speaks of “the stewardship of the grace of God which was given to me for you,” and in verse 3 he describes this stewardship as the dispensing of the revelation of the hidden mystery of Christ. Similarly, in Colossians 1:25 Paul speaks of “the stewardship of God, which was given to me for you,” and in verses 26 and 27 he goes on to discuss this stewardship as the carrying out of the revelation of the previously concealed mystery concerning Christ. In Paul’s concept, the stewardship of the grace of God is virtually synonymous with the stewardship of God; therefore, grace, which the believers inherit, is nothing less than the Triune God Himself imparted into them—the God of all grace embodied in Christ and realized as the Spirit of grace (1 Pet. 5:10; 2 Cor. 13:14; Heb. 10:29). By virtue of their organic union with Christ, which makes them fellow members of the Body of Christ and fellow members of the household of God (Eph. 2:16, 19), the believers are also fellow heirs of the Triune God as the grace of life both in the present age and for eternity (cf. v. 7).

Similarly, it is in Christ Jesus that the believers are fellow partakers of the promise through the gospel, that is, joint participants in God’s Old Testament promises concerning all the blessings of God’s New Testament economy (3:6). When the Gentiles were apart from Christ, they were “strangers to the covenants of the promise, having no hope and without God in the world” (2:12). But now in Christ, that is, in an organic union with Christ, the Gentile believers, who were far off from the covenants of God’s promise and all its attendant blessings, have become qualified in the blood of Christ to enjoy these divine blessings (v. 13). In Paul’s mind, the ultimate and all-inclusive blessing of the gospel promised in the Old Testament is the Spirit as the blessing of Abraham, of whom all the believers in Christ, whether Jew or Gentile, may jointly partake (1:14; Gal. 3:8, 14, 17-18, 26-29).

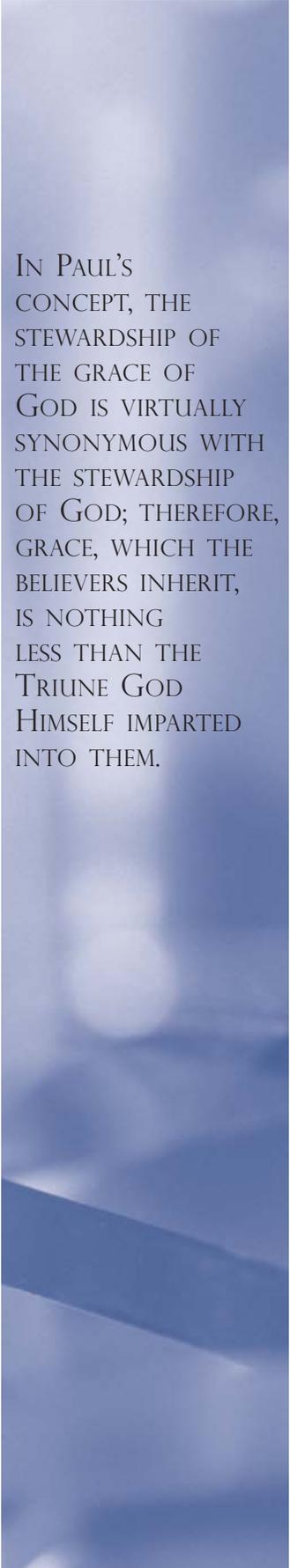
In light of the broader context surrounding Ephesians 3:6, the mystery of Christ—which is the church as the aim of God’s eternal purpose—is something much more profound than simply the bringing together of the Jews and Gentiles in the church. Rather, the mystery of Christ is the organic Body of Christ composed of all believers, both Jewish and Gentile, who have been incorporated into Christ, inherit the Triune God as the grace of life, and partake of the Spirit. In order for the believers to carry out God’s eternal purpose to produce the Body of Christ, the mystery of Christ, they, like Paul, should be prisoners in the Lord (4:1), remaining in a vital union with Christ for their corporate enjoyment of God in Christ as the Spirit.

The Church—the Issue of the Believers’ Enjoyment of the Riches of Christ

The centrality of Christ in the accomplishment of God’s eternal purpose to bring forth the church (3:6) is further revealed in Ephesians 3:8-11, where Paul describes his commission as a minister of the gospel:

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.

Immediately before verses 10 and 11, which discuss God’s eternal purpose to have the church as the manifestation of His wisdom, Paul speaks of God as the One who created all things (v. 9). This implies that God created all things for the execution of



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His eternal purpose to obtain the church as His corporate expression. God created the universe as the setting for His purpose to be carried out (Gen. 1:1; Rev. 4:11). At the center of creation, as revealed in Genesis 1 and 2, was God's formation of humankind in His image, that is, in the image of Christ, who is the image of God (1:26; 2 Cor. 4:4). God created human beings in such a way so that they, as earthen vessels, could receive, contain, and manifest Christ as an excellent treasure for the fulfillment of His purpose to gain the church as His enlarged expression in Christ (Gen. 2:7; 2 Cor. 4:7).

The eternal purpose that God made in Christ to produce the church marks the fundamental reason for the existence of the universe and of humankind. Regardless of how wealthy, learned, virtuous, or successful we may be, unless we are filled with Christ as our unique content and express Him corporately as the church, our human life is meaningless, for it contradicts the purpose for which we were created (Eccl. 1:2, 17; 2:9-11; 3:11). We can fulfill the purpose of our existence only by allowing Christ to be revealed in us, live in us, and be formed in us for the building up of the church, the organic corporate expression of Christ (Gal. 1:16; 2:20; 4:19). Although the length of our sojourn in time is miniscule compared to the span of eternity, this sojourn is imbued with eternal significance if it contributes to the realization of God's eternal purpose to have the church as His universal expression in Christ (cf. 2 Cor. 4:17-18).

According to Ephesians 3:8-11, the apostle's twofold ministry—announcing the unsearchable riches of Christ as the gospel and enlightening all to see the economy of the mystery—issues in the church as the exhibition of the multifarious wisdom of God for the accomplishment of His eternal purpose. The content of Paul's gospel was not health and prosperity but a wonderful person—Christ with His unsearchable riches as the centrality and universality of the economy of the mystery. In announcing Christ as the gospel to the Gentiles, Paul did not merely instruct them with a set of theological formulations concerning Christ for their doctrinal education; instead, he ministered the unsearchable riches of Christ as grace to them for their subjective enjoyment of Him. Paul refers to his commission by using two particular phrases concerning grace in Ephesians 3. In verse 2 he first speaks of “the stewardship of the grace of God,” which was given to him for the believers in Ephesus. In verses 7 and 8, he recounts that he became a “minister according to the gift of the grace of God,” which was given to him to announce the unsearchable riches of Christ as the gospel to the Gentiles. Paul, as a minister of the unsearchably rich Christ, was a steward of the grace of God. The Greek word translated “stewardship” (οἰκονομία) suggests not only a steward's function to manage a household but also his responsibility to dispense food and drink to the members of the household. Paul, as a faithful steward, dispensed the surpassing riches of God's grace as spiritual nourishment to his fellow members in the household of God (1 Cor. 4:2; Matt. 24:45; Eph. 2:19; 1 Cor. 3:1-2, 5-6; 10:3-4).

Just as grace was given to Paul for his stewardship, his ministry of the riches of Christ, so also grace was given to every believer, to each one of us, for our participation in the same stewardship (Eph. 4:7). Shortly after proclaiming that he had received the stewardship of the grace of God (3:2) and immediately before declaring that he had been given grace to minister the riches of Christ to others (v. 8), Paul refers to himself as being less than the least of all saints (v. 8). This is to prove that all the saints, no matter how insignificant they consider themselves, can receive the same grace that he received and can participate in the same ministry of the riches of Christ as stewards of grace (v. 2; 1 Pet. 4:10). The issue of such ministry to the believers is the growth of Christ in them for the constitution of the church as the display of God's manifold wisdom. In Paul's words, the church is the *Body of Christ*, the fullness of the all-filling Christ (Eph. 1:22-23). As such, the church takes Christ as its unique element. The

church cannot be produced by doctrinal knowledge, organization, gifts, signs, or wonders but only with Christ in His unsearchable riches. The church as the Body of Christ, the exhibition of God's multifarious wisdom, is the organic issue of the believers' subjective enjoyment of the unsearchable riches of Christ.

The Church—the Display of the Multifarious Wisdom of God Imparted into the Believers

The unsearchable riches of Christ refer to the untold wealth of the all-inclusive and all-extensive Christ, who, as the Son of God, is the embodiment of the Triune God (Col. 2:9). These riches are composed of all that Christ is and has, such as the fullness of the Godhead, the bountiful supply of the Spirit, and the divine attributes and human virtues of the Lord Jesus (Phil. 1:19). These riches also include all that Christ has accomplished—in particular, His creation of the universe (John 1:3), His human living (vv. 4, 14; Phil. 2:7-8), His redemptive and life-releasing death (John 1:29; 12:24), His death-overcoming and life-imparting resurrection (Rev. 1:18; Eph. 2:5), and His all-transcending ascension (4:10). Furthermore, they include all that Christ attained and obtained—God's glory and honor, the highest position in the universe, the highest name in the universe, the lordship with all authority, the headship over all things, and the kingdom with its throne (Heb. 2:9; Eph. 1:20-22; Phil. 2:9-11; Rev. 5:12-13).

Similarly, the multifarious wisdom of God, as Witness Lee states, refers to “all that God is” (*Three Aspects* 19). Just as “a person's wisdom includes everything that a person is,” so also “God's wisdom includes all that God is” (19). Lee points out that in light of Colossians 2:9, which speaks of Christ as the One in whom all the fullness of the Godhead dwells bodily, and verse 3, which speaks of Christ as the One in whom all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge are hidden, *wisdom* should be understood to be an all-inclusive term that refers to all that God is (19). This indicates that the believers' participation in the untraceable riches of Christ issues in the church as His Body, which displays the manifold wisdom of God, that is, the splendid manifestation of all that God is.

Moreover, in Paul's view, Christ is not only the repository of all the treasures of God's wisdom; He is even the wisdom of God itself (1 Cor. 1:24). According to Paul's understanding, wisdom is not only an attribute of God but also the resurrected Christ as the life-giving Spirit (15:45). Further, Paul reveals that God's eternal purpose is to impart the unfathomably rich Christ as wisdom into the believers' tripartite being, declaring in 1 Corinthians 1:30 that it is of God that we are in Christ Jesus, “who became wisdom to us from God: both righteousness and sanctification and redemption.” Our being in Christ Jesus refers to our mystical union with Christ as the life-giving Spirit, to whom we have been joined to be one spirit (6:17), and the expression *wisdom to us from God* implies the thought of God transmitting Christ as wisdom to us. Christ as wisdom is progressively dispensed into us in three vital stages of God's full salvation: righteousness for our past, sanctification for our present, and redemption for our future.

First, Christ became our righteousness in order for us to be justified by God so that we may be regenerated in our spirit to receive His eternal life. Based on the redemption that Christ accomplished through His substitutionary death (Eph. 1:7), we believed into Him to receive God's forgiveness, and God justified us in Christ, making Christ our righteousness and clothing us with Christ as the robe of righteousness (Acts 13:39; Gal. 2:17; Rom. 3:24, 26; Jer. 23:6; Isa. 61:10). In harmony with this thought, Paul declares that our “spirit is life because of righteousness” (Rom. 8:10). Second, Christ is sanctification to us in the present in order to sanctify our soul with the divine life (6:19, 22).

THE RICHES OF CHRIST INCLUDE ALL HE ACCOMPLISHED—HIS CREATION OF THE UNIVERSE, HIS HUMAN LIVING, HIS REDEMPTIVE AND LIFE-RELEASING DEATH, HIS DEATH-OVERCOMING AND LIFE-IMPARTING RESURRECTION, AND HIS ALL-TRANSCENDING ASCENSION.

THE TRANSMISSION
OF CHRIST AS
WISDOM TO US
FROM GOD IS
EQUIVALENT TO
THE IMPARTATION OF
THE UNSEARCHABLY
RICH CHRIST INTO
OUR TRIPARTITE
BEING SO THAT HE,
AS THE MULTIFARIOUS
WISDOM OF GOD,
MAY BE MANIFESTED
THROUGH US
AS THE CHURCH.

In order for our soul to be sanctified, that is, separated unto God and saturated with His holy nature, we need to allow the pneumatic Christ, who is the Holy One and the Holy Spirit, to gradually spread from our spirit into all the parts of our soul—our mind, emotion, and will (Acts 3:14; John 20:22; Rom. 8:6; 15:16). Throughout the course of our Christian life, Christ as sanctification seeks to transform our soul into His image by dispensing Himself into our soul in order to permeate it with the divine life (2 Cor. 3:18; Rom. 8:6, 28). Third, Christ is redemption to us for our future so that at His return, that is, on the day of redemption (Eph. 4:30), our mortal body will be swallowed up by life for the glorification of our body (2 Cor. 5:4). At His second coming, Christ will transfigure our body of humiliation into the body of His glory so that we may obtain the full sonship, the redemption of our body (Phil. 3:21; Rom. 8:23).

God's placing us into a spiritual union with Christ and His imparting Christ as wisdom to us entails God's complete salvation of our spirit, soul, and body: He first regenerated our spirit based on righteousness; He is now sanctifying our soul; and He will eventually redeem our body, uniting us with Himself and making us the same as He is in our entire tripartite being. Therefore, the transmission of Christ as wisdom to us from God is equivalent to the impartation of the unsearchably rich Christ into our tripartite being so that He, as the multifarious wisdom of God, may be manifested through us as the church according to God's eternal purpose. This wisdom refers to the immeasurably rich Christ transmitted into and expressed through our entire tripartite being for the radiant manifestation of the Triune God in Christ, who is the unique factor of the oneness and peace among the believers (Eph. 2:14, 20-22; 4:4-6).

The Church—the Expression of Christ Making His Home in the Believers' Hearts

Christ occupies the central place in the carrying out of God's eternal purpose to produce the church as the corporate expression of God. Nowhere is this more clearly revealed than in Paul's prayer in Ephesians 3:14-21. In verse 14 Paul says, "For this cause I bow my knees unto the Father." The expression *this cause*, which refers to the eternal purpose of God, links Paul's intercession with God's purpose, indicating that the underlying goal of Paul's prayer is the realization of God's ultimate purpose presented in verses 2 through 13. The focus of Paul's prayer is that the Father would strengthen us according to the riches of His glory and through His Spirit into our inner man so that Christ may make His home in our hearts for the producing of the fullness of God (vv. 16-17, 19). Glory is God expressed in splendor, and the riches of the Father's glory cannot be separated from the riches of Christ as God's grace (v. 8; cf. 1:18). Hence, Paul's prayer for the accomplishment of God's eternal purpose is a prayer for the Father to impart the riches of His glory, the unsearchable riches of Christ as grace, into us for the producing of a glorious expression of God within us.

The result of receiving the transmission of the riches of God's glory, the unsearchable riches of Christ, is not merely an outward improvement of ethical conduct; instead, it is Christ's making His home within our inner being. This indwelling of the untraceably rich Christ involves His spreading from our spirit into all the parts of our heart—the mind, emotion, will, and conscience—until He occupies and saturates the entirety of our heart. Such a home-making Christ is the all-extensive One, whose dimensions are immeasurably vast and whose love is knowledge-surpassing (3:18-19). When this universally extensive Christ permeates our inward parts, corporately we are filled unto all the fullness of God (v. 19). Here some translations assign the meaning "with" to the Greek word translated "unto" (εἰς), thus rendering verse 19 as, "You may be filled with all the fullness of God" (AV, RSV), which implies that the fullness of God is the element with which the believers are filled. However, εἰς more properly denotes "resulting in." As Ernest Best contends in *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on Ephesians*, the rendering of εἰς as "with" would "rob the preposition (εἰς) of its true

value,” since εἰς “suggests a movement towards all the fullness of God,” which is “a goal which has not yet been attained” (347-348). Best thus translates the verse as, “You may be filled to attain to the total fullness of God” (334). In *Ephesians: An Exegetical Commentary* Harold W. Hoehner likewise observes that “the preposition εἰς indicates movement toward a goal and thus could be translated ‘up to the level of’ or ‘to the measure of’ (NIV) or ‘filled unto’ (RV, ASV)” (490).

All the fullness of God dwells in Christ (Col. 1:19; 2:9). As Christ, the embodiment of the Triune God, makes His home in our hearts, thereby imparting the divine riches into us, we are increasingly filled with the element of the Triune God. As a result of the divine riches being imparted into our being, we will eventually be filled with the Triune God to the extent of becoming the fullness of God (Eph. 3:19), which fullness is the enlarged expression of the Triune God in Christ through the church as the Body of Christ. Thus, in Paul’s mind the issue of the immeasurably extensive Christ personally making His home in our inner being is not for individualistic spiritual perfection but for becoming the fullness of the Triune God as the church, the fullness of the One who fills all in all (1:23). The building up of the church, the goal of God’s eternal purpose, requires us to allow the indwelling Christ to make His home in our hearts by permeating all our inward parts with Himself.

According to the conclusion of Paul’s prayer in Ephesians 3, the end result of the building of Christ into our hearts is the glorification, the full expression, of God in the church as the Body of Christ: “To Him be the glory in the church and in Christ Jesus unto all the generations forever and ever” (v. 21). The eternal purpose of God, which originated from the good pleasure of His eternal will (1:9) and is carried out in time through the dispensing of Himself in the Son as the Spirit into His elect, will issue in an eternal, glorious corporate expression of the Triune God not only in Christ Jesus, the embodiment of the fullness of the Godhead, but also in the church as the Body of Christ, the fullness of the all-filling Christ (vv. 5, 10-11; Rom. 11:36).

The Church—the Means by Which God’s Multifarious Wisdom Is Made Known to His Enemies

With respect to the positive aspect of God’s eternal purpose, the church as the Body of Christ displays Christ as God’s multifarious wisdom and expresses all that God is, fulfilling God’s eternal desire for a corporate man bearing His image. Since the church as the “one Body” is the “one new man,” which Christ created in Himself (Eph. 2:15-16), it is also God’s poetic “masterpiece, created in Christ Jesus” (v. 10), God’s masterwork demonstrating His untraceable wisdom and sublime design (v. 7). It is through this masterpiece, created with Christ as its unique element, that God will display in the ages to come the surpassing riches of His grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus to the praise of the glory of His grace (v. 7; 1:6).

With respect to the negative aspect of God’s eternal purpose, the church makes known the multifarious wisdom of God to the rulers and the authorities in the heavenlies, fulfilling God’s eternal desire for the display of His dominion. The expression *the rulers and the authorities in the heavenlies* refers to “angelic rulers and authorities, both good and evil,” though “the passage here refers particularly to the evil ones—Satan and his angels” (Lee, Recovery Version, Eph. 3:10, note 1). This thought is corroborated by 6:10-12, where Paul exhorts the believers to stand against “the stratagems of the devil” and wrestle “against the rulers, against the authorities, against the world-rulers of this darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenlies.” Here the devil is the ruler of the authority of the air (2:2), and *the rulers, the authorities, and the world-rulers of this darkness* refer to “the rebellious angels, who followed Satan in his rebellion against God and who now rule in the heavenlies over the nations of the world—such as the prince of Persia and the prince of Greece in Dan. 10:20” (Lee,

WITH RESPECT TO THE NEGATIVE ASPECT OF GOD’S ETERNAL PURPOSE, THE CHURCH MAKES KNOWN THE MULTIFARIOUS WISDOM OF GOD TO THE RULERS AND THE AUTHORITIES IN THE HEAVENLIES, FULFILLING GOD’S ETERNAL DESIRE FOR THE DISPLAY OF HIS DOMINION.

GOD CANNOT
BE DETERRED;
INSTEAD, HE IS
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MAGNIFICENT
OPPORTUNITIES
TO MANIFEST IN
FULL NOT ONLY
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BOUNDLESS GRACE,
AND RICH MERCY
BUT ALSO HIS
MULTIFARIOUS
WISDOM IN THE
NULLIFICATION OF
SATAN'S WORK.

Recovery Version, Eph. 6:12, note 2). Revelation 12 confirms this view, indicating that Satan and his evil angels are presently in heaven, where they will remain until they are eventually cast down at the end of this age (vv. 3-4, 7-9, 12). This indicates that in the present age the church is expected to exhibit and represent God's manifold wisdom to the humiliation of Satan and his spiritual forces.

Our God is the only wise God (Rom. 16:27), and His wisdom is sound, great, effectual, unsearchable, and multifarious, having many aspects and directions (Job 12:16; Isa. 28:29; Rom. 11:33). Certainly the wisdom of God is manifested in His creation of the universe and all things in it, for it was by wisdom that God established the world, founded the earth, made all things in it, and did many works therein (Psa. 104:24; Prov. 3:19; Jer. 10:12). More significantly, the multifarious wisdom of God is made known to Satan and his hosts in their defeat through the producing and building up of the church as the Body of Christ despite Satan's relentless opposition. After God created humankind for the realization of His eternal purpose, God's enemy attempted to foil His purpose by seducing Adam and Eve into partaking of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil (Gen. 3:1-7).

With that act Satan entered into man's body to become sin within man (Rom. 7:8, 11, 17, 20), injecting his sinful life and nature into them and causing them to become children of the devil (1 John 3:10), offspring of vipers (Matt. 3:7), and sons of the evil one (13:38). As a consequence, man's human spirit was deadened, losing its function to contact God (Col. 2:13); his soul was corrupted with Satan's evil thought, feeling, and will (Gen. 3:1, 4-6); and his sinless body was transmuted into the flesh of sin (Rom. 7:18). Man's entire tripartite being was therefore damaged and, in such a state, precluded from accomplishing God's original purpose. Nevertheless, God could not be deterred; instead, God was provided a magnificent opportunity to manifest in full not only His great love, boundless grace, and rich mercy but also His multifarious wisdom in the nullification of Satan's work.

According to His wisdom, God sent His Son in the likeness of the flesh of sin so that He might destroy the works of the devil (8:3; 1 John 3:8). In an attempt to terminate the Son of God, Satan instigated lawless men to nail the Son to the cross (Acts 2:23). Unaware of the divine economy hidden in God, however, Satan did not anticipate that through His death Christ would destroy him, condemn sin in the flesh, accomplish redemption for humankind, abolish the separating ordinances, and release the divine life from within Himself (Heb. 2:14; Rom. 8:3; Heb. 9:15; Eph. 2:15; John 12:24; 19:34). Through such an all-inclusive death and resurrection, Christ carried out God's eternal purpose—to dispense the life of God into His redeemed elect for the producing of the church as the Body of Christ. In this sense, Satan is utilized by God to unwittingly contribute not only to his own demise but also to the producing of the church. This exemplifies to the uttermost how God grasps the wise in their craftiness (1 Cor. 3:19). The tribulations instigated by Satan against the believers are the “incarnation of grace” because “through tribulations the killing effect of the cross of Christ on our natural being is applied in us by the Holy Spirit, making the way for the God of resurrection to add Himself to us” as abounding grace and thereby constitute us as genuine stewards of the grace of God for the producing of the organic Body of Christ (Lee, Recovery Version, Rom. 5:3, note 1).

The devil casts some of the believers who bear the testimony of Jesus “into prison,” causing them to “be tried” and “have tribulation” (Rev. 2:10). Paul himself was imprisoned for the sake of God's economy, and he rejoiced in his sufferings on behalf of the members of the Body of Christ and filled up on his part that which is lacking of the afflictions of Christ in his flesh for His Body, the church (Col. 4:10; 1:24-25). The afflictions that Satan inflicted on Paul ultimately enabled him to contribute greatly to the building up of the Body of Christ. These afflictions helped Paul to experience the

operation of the cross of Christ on his natural man and ushered him into the enjoyment of His grace and the fellowship of His sufferings (Phil. 3:10; Rom. 8:17; cf. 2 Cor. 12:7-9).

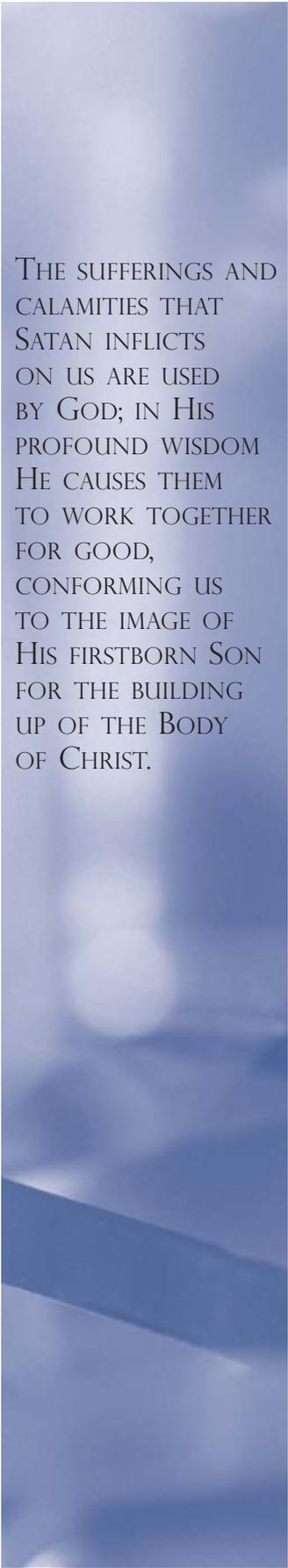
Through his participation in Christ's sufferings, that is, through his union with Christ in His life-releasing death, Paul released the divine life from his spirit and ministered this life to other members of the Body for the increase of Christ within them (4:10-12). For this reason Paul exhorted the believers in Ephesus not to faint at his afflictions but to count them as their glory, realizing that through his participation in the afflictions of Christ, he ministered the grace of life to them, resulting in glory within them (Eph. 3:13). Moreover, at the conclusion of his third ministry journey, God in His sovereignty allowed Satan to instigate not only the Jews to arrest him but also the Romans to imprison him for several years (Acts 21:17-28, 33; 22:24; 23:10, 22-27). It was during those years that Paul wrote his last eight Epistles, thereby fulfilling the stewardship of God entrusted to him to complete the word of God for the purpose of presenting a full revelation of God's New Testament economy (Col. 1:24-27). In principle, all kinds of sufferings and calamities that Satan inflicts on us are used by God; in His profound wisdom He causes them to work together for good, conforming us to the image of His firstborn Son for the building up of the Body of Christ (Rom. 8:28-29; 35-39; 12:4-5).

The built-up church as a universal display of the multifarious wisdom of God signals the total annulment of Satan's work within the believers and the fulfillment of God's eternal purpose within them. In Ephesians Paul provides a bleak description of fallen human beings in their tripartite being: they are "children of wrath" and "sons of disobedience," those alienated from the life of God (2:2-3; 4:18) and dead in their offenses and sins due to the deadness of their spirit (2:1, 5); they walk in the vanity of their mind, being darkened in their understanding because of the hardness of their heart (4:17-18), and conduct themselves in the lusts of their flesh, doing the desires of the flesh (2:3).

However, in the same Epistle Paul also reveals that God carries out His full salvation in the believers by transmitting Christ as wisdom to them to be their righteousness, sanctification, and redemption (5:25-27). In the past Christ as the Redeemer loved the church and gave Himself up for the church, accomplishing redemption and becoming our righteousness in order to regenerate our spirit (v. 25). In the present Christ as the life-giving Spirit is sanctifying the church, cleansing her by the washing of the water in the word in order to dispense God's holy nature into our soul (v. 26). And in the future Christ as the Bridegroom will present the church to Himself as His holy and glorious bride, transfiguring and redeeming our body with the divine life to bear His likeness (v. 27).

Prior to experiencing God's salvation, the believers were divided due to ordinances, various ways of living and worship, which formed a middle wall of partition, an enmity (2:14). However, the execution of God's salvation in the believers will eventually issue in the manifestation of the reality of the church as the one new man and the one Body (vv. 15-16). As constituents of the one new man, the believers will no longer be at enmity with one another but will enjoy Christ as their peace (v. 14); as members of God's household, they will no longer be alienated from one another but will be fitted and built together into God's dwelling place, experiencing Christ as the cornerstone that joins them (vv. 19-22); and as members of the Body of Christ, they will no longer be divided but will be joined and knit together for the building up of the Body, keeping the oneness of the Spirit and arriving at the oneness of the faith and of the full knowledge of the Son of God (4:2-3, 13-16).

God in His deep and rich wisdom transforms corrupted and divided children of wrath



THE SUFFERINGS AND CALAMITIES THAT SATAN INFLECTS ON US ARE USED BY GOD; IN HIS PROFOUND WISDOM HE CAUSES THEM TO WORK TOGETHER FOR GOOD, CONFORMING US TO THE IMAGE OF HIS FIRSTBORN SON FOR THE BUILDING UP OF THE BODY OF CHRIST.

IN EPHESIANS 3
PAUL REVEALS THE
ETERNAL PURPOSE
THAT GOD
MADE IN CHRIST
CONCERNING
THE CHURCH—
A UNIVERSAL
DISPLAY OF GOD'S
MULTIFARIOUS
WISDOM FOR
HIS CORPORATE
EXPRESSION AND
REPRESENTATION IN
REDEEMED HUMANITY.

into His beloved and deified children and makes them the members of the unique Body of Christ and the components of the corporate bride of Christ, from whom every vestige of the fall is eradicated and through whom the holy and glorious God is fully expressed (5:1, 27). In time, Satan and his minions will behold the exhibition of the multifarious wisdom of God—the built-up church as an organic entity in which the believers are united with Christ and built with one another. At that time Satan, the source of corruption and the origin of division among humankind, will realize, to his utter dismay, that all his plotting and work to undermine God's will has come to naught and has, instead, only afforded God countless opportunities to display His multifaceted wisdom in carrying out His eternal and unalterable purpose. The church as the means by which the manifold wisdom of God is made known to the evil angels is simultaneously a glory to God and a shame to His enemy; it is the realization of God's eternal purpose to gain a corporate man who expresses God's image throughout the created realm and exercises God's dominion over every rebellious element in the universe.

Conclusion

In Ephesians 3 Paul reveals the eternal purpose that God made in Christ concerning the church—a universal display of God's multifarious wisdom for His corporate expression and representation in redeemed humanity. This eternal purpose of God is formed and fulfilled in Christ as its centrality and universality, and it is accomplished through the dispensing of the riches of Christ as grace into the believers. In particular, Ephesians 3 unveils crucial aspects of the church, the principal goal of God's purpose, as the issue of the believers' union with Christ and their participation in His riches. First, the church as the mystery of Christ is the organic Body of Christ composed of the believers, both Jewish and Gentile, as fellow members, who live in an organic union with Christ, as fellow heirs of the Triune God as the grace of life, and as fellow partakers of the Spirit as the promised blessing. Second, the church is the product of the stewardship of grace, which ushers the believers into the subjective enjoyment of the unsearchable riches of Christ as grace. Third, the church is the fullness of God, the expression of the immeasurably extensive Christ personally making His home in the believers' hearts. Fourth, the church is an exhibition of the unsearchably rich Christ as the multifarious wisdom of God, imparted into and expressed through the believers' tripartite being, in order to display God's dominion over the rebellious angels. As such, the church is not only a glorious expression of all that God is in Christ but also a testimony of the absolute triumph of the only wise God in fulfilling His eternal purpose notwithstanding Satan's efforts to the contrary, for the built-up church will testify to Satan and his hosts that all their evil designs to impede God's purpose actually contributed to its fulfillment, providing God the opportunity to manifest His multifarious wisdom. Ultimately, such a church brings glory to God and shame to His enemy.

Although the mystery of Christ—the church produced out of the unsearchable riches of Christ as the goal of God's eternal purpose—has been revealed to the holy apostles and prophets in spirit as well as to those who have been enlightened by Paul's ministry, this mystery has not been adequately unveiled to the vast majority of believers today. If the eyes of our heart remain veiled concerning God's eternal purpose, we will be ignorant of the purpose for which we were created, redeemed, and regenerated; as a result, we are reduced to a life of vanity—a life that, apart from our initial salvation, contributes very little to the accomplishment of God's purpose. May the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, grant to us and to all the believers a spirit of wisdom and revelation and enlighten the eyes of our heart so that we may know and participate in the accomplishment of His eternal purpose, thereby fulfilling the purpose of our existence. May the Father strengthen us through His Spirit

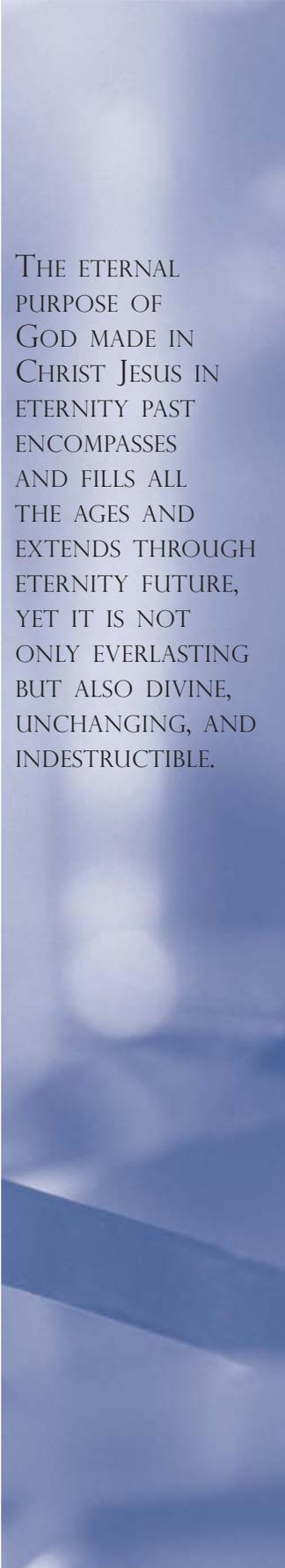
into the inner man so that we may live in an organic union with Christ, allow Christ to make His home in our hearts, partake of the riches of Christ as grace, and minister these riches to others for the building up of the church as the Body of Christ—the corporate enlargement of Christ for God’s full expression and representation in eternity. [AFC](#)

Note

¹The Greek expression translated “eternal purpose” in Ephesians 3:11 (πρόθεσιν τῶν αἰώνων) may also be rendered “purpose of the ages.” The latter rendering does not denote a purpose formed in ages past and, as such, something implicitly bound to the sphere of time; instead, it denotes God’s singular purpose conceived in eternity past, carried out through the ages on the bridge of time, and completed for eternity future. God’s purpose is of the ages; each preordained age serves to progressively fulfill God’s inexorable plan. Most translations and commentaries, therefore, agree that although the Greek word αἰώνων may be rendered “ages,” here the meaning is closer to “eternity”; hence, “the eternal purpose” is a more accurate rendering. This phrase implies that although God’s purpose concerns humanity, which was created by God in time, this purpose originated before time began (1:4-5, 9-11). Furthermore, *the eternal purpose* speaks not only to the extent of God’s purpose chronologically—spanning all time from eternity past to eternity future—but also to its nature qualitatively, as being divine, unchanging, and indestructible. In other words, God’s purpose is not merely everlasting in time but also eternal and divine in nature. This thought is reminiscent of John 3:15-16, in which the adjectival form of αἰών, αἰώνιος (eternal), is used to modify ζωή (life). “This is the divine life, the uncreated life of God, which not only is everlasting with respect to time but also is eternal and divine in nature” (Lee, Recovery Version, v. 15, note 1). The eternal purpose of God made in Christ Jesus in eternity past encompasses and fills all the ages and extends through eternity future, yet it is not only everlasting but also divine, unchanging, and indestructible.

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