

The Church

as the One New Man in Ephesians — a Corporate Person

by James Fite

English versions of Ephesians 2:15 consistently translate ἓνα καινὸν ἄνθρωπον (lit. “one new man”) with corporate terms but diverge considerably when rendering the same phrase τὸν καινὸν ἄνθρωπον (lit. “the new man”) in 4:24. These differences highlight the complex scope of this seemingly simple phrase. Various interpretations of this phrase both reflect and lead to fundamental insights into how Christians may live and work and, hence, to what extent such living and work ultimately correspond to God’s will, intention, and heart’s desire.

A Mystery—the Context of the Revelation of the New Man in Ephesians

Ephesians 2 and 4, the chapters that mention the new man, should be read in the context of the rest of Paul’s letter. This Epistle repeatedly speaks of God’s will and purpose, while highlighting that revelation is needed since the object, process, and outcome of His will are a mystery (1:9, 17; 3:3). The focus of God’s will and the Christian faith is the person and the redemptive work of Christ Jesus, who is God incarnate (1:5, 7). The beloved Son is the object of the Father’s love (v. 6). Furthermore, we, the believers, are also the object of His grace, favor, and pleasure so that we may enjoy all that He is to us. In gracing us, God makes us those who are delightful to Him. Hence, we are the beneficiaries of God’s selection, love, and mercy (2:4).

Ephesians 1 repeatedly refers to God’s will and particularly to the mystery of His will. Paul was sent as an apostle because of and through the will of God (v. 1). It was the good pleasure of the will of God the Father to choose the believers and predestinate them unto sonship, that is, for them to have the life and position of God’s sons (vv. 4-5). It is in Christ the Beloved that God is pleased to make known to us “the mystery of His will,” which “He purposed in Himself” (v. 9). Furthermore, God works “all things according to the counsel of His will” (v. 11). Chapter 1 concludes with “His Body, the fullness of the One who fills all in all” (v. 23). Paul’s repeated mention of the Body indicates that the framework of this Epistle has a corporate theme (2:16; 3:6; 4:4, 12, 16; 5:23).

Chapter 3 indicates that God’s economy—His arrangement and process for accomplishing His will—is also a mystery, since it involves Christ’s being revealed though His incarnation, crucifixion, resurrection, and ascension to produce the glorious church (v. 21). Paul says that by revelation he came to know and understand in spirit that the mystery of Christ is the church in which the “Gentiles are fellow heirs and fellow members of the Body of Christ” (vv. 4-6). The apostle was given grace to “announce...the unsearchable riches of Christ as the gospel” to the Gentiles and thereby enlighten them to see the hidden “economy of the mystery” (vv. 8-9). Consistent with God’s eternal purpose made in Christ, those who partake of this gospel of the rich Christ become the church, which exhibits the wisdom of God (vv. 10-11).