

God's Gospel-Centred Plan (2)

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Date: 23 October 2011

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[0 : 0 0] Now, friends, those of you who are new with us, we are working through a series on the Gospel, and I need to warn you, it's a bit of hard work.

And that's why I encourage you, we here take a study of the Bible seriously, and so I encourage you to take notes. Notes are good. Notes help you concentrate, and particularly in a difficult topic, they help you to grasp what is going on.

But some of you might be like others, like myself, don't take notes very well, although I did this morning, so I can at least instruct you to do what I did this morning. But you may not like notes, might just like someone who likes listening, and that's fine.

But I do warn you that, you know, we're going to travel, cover a bit of distance today, and there's some heavy things, but there are things that really undergird our church life together. So with that in mind, let me pray.

Father, we do pray that you'd help us as we study the Scriptures tonight, help us to understand them, help us to obey them, and help us therefore to give glory to your Son.

[1 : 1 3] We pray this in his name. Amen. Well, friends, I want to read to you just from a passage of a novel. To Sherlock Holmes, she is always the woman.

I've seldom heard of him mention her under any other name. In his eyes, she eclipses, and she predominates the whole of her sex. It was not as though he felt any emotion akin to love for Irene Adler.

All emotions, and that one particularly, were abhorrent to his cold, precise, but admirably balanced mind. He was, I take it, the most perfect reasoning and observing machine that the world has seen.

And yet, there was but one woman for him, and that woman was the late Irene Adler of dubious and questionable memory. That is a novel written by Sir Arthur Conan Doyle called A Scandal in Bohemia.

And the writings of Doyle of a man called Edgar Allan Poe and Herman Melville and Wilkie Collins, they defined a genre which hadn't been seen before in English literature. They were stories of shock and of awe.

[2 : 2 2] They were explorations of the unknown. They were investigations into sort of hidden paths, journeys into dark places and dark people. And for 200 years, those stories have defined for us the word mystery.

When you think of the word mystery, they often have echoes of such novels. A mystery, we think, is something written by a novelist. It often involves detectives and police.

It's something to be solved. It's a resolution to be reached. But the word mystery actually is not a new word. It was not a word really that just belongs to novelists. It was an ancient word and it had very ancient connotations.

It's a word that the Apostle Paul liked. And he used it lots. And he used it in his own peculiar way. And the word is used 27 times in the New Testament.

And Paul is responsible for 21 of those 27. And the place I want to concentrate on is in Ephesians 3. So have a look at Ephesians 3 with me. Now, let me read what Paul says.

[3 : 26] He says this, verse 1, chapter 3. This is the reason that I, Paul, am a prisoner for Christ Jesus for the sake of the Gentiles. For surely you have heard of the commission of God's grace that was given me for you and how the mystery was made known to me by revelation.

As I wrote above in a few words, a reading of which will enable you to perceive my understanding of the mystery of Christ. In former generations, that mystery was not made known to humankind.

As it has now been revealed to his holy apostles and prophets by the Spirit. That is, that Gentiles have become fellow heirs, members of the same body, and sharers in the promise of Christ Jesus through the gospel.

And as he moves on through chapter 3, you hear him talk about the mystery a number of times. But I want you to notice what he says. First of all, he says, Look, I have been commissioned by God to administer this mystery.

A mystery for Paul is something that in the past had been hidden in the mind of God, but now has been revealed. In other words, it was some sort of secret plan that God had from before the foundation of the world, something hidden in his mind.

[4 : 42] He may have hinted at it once or twice in scripture, but it was not generally known to people. It might have been known to the apostles and prophets and so on, but now God had made it known through revelation.

What God had done is by his Spirit, he had revealed this mystery to his apostles and prophets. And Paul had been given a commission by God to put this secret plan of God out from being secret into the public domain.

It was now accessible for everyone. So here is the, what Paul is saying is, do you know God had something hidden in his mind? Something he'd let people have a glimpse at before. Something now he's revealed to me in full and something he's told me to put into the public domain.

And verse 4 tells us that this mystery is the mystery of Christ. That is the mystery of God's Messiah. And verse 6 tells us the content of it. The mystery revealed is this.

Now, you know, wait for it. He's about to tell you. The mystery that has been hidden in the mind of God now revealed. What is it? We'll see if you can find it in the text. What is the great mystery? It is this.

[5 : 50] That the Gentiles are heirs. Fellow heirs. Let me say it again. The great mystery hidden in the mind of God now revealed is that Gentiles are fellow heirs.

That is, they are members of the same body as Jews. They're partners in the promises of God. And this extraordinary inclusion has happened through the gospel, the good news of Jesus Christ.

Now, I really need you to understand this. You see, it's critical for us Christian people. We are all Gentiles and we think, oh, it's just always been this way. But no, it is not true. And this fact is critical for our life together.

God has had a secret plan from the beginning of time. And that secret plan is that all humanity are to be reconciled to him. Jews and Gentiles together are to be partners in salvation.

And the center of that plan is Jesus Christ. It is a plan, says Paul, in Christ Jesus, in the Messiah Jesus. And the place where this plan is revealed is in the good news, the gospel.

[7 : 01] The gospel, the gospel concerning Christ is the key to unlocking the eternal plan of God. Gentiles are to be fellow heirs.

They are to be members of the same body. They are to be partners in the promises with Jews. The language of chapter 2, verse 15 is that there is to be one new man.

Or if I could put it another way, one new humanity. You see, what God is saying is up until now, there have been, well, up until Genesis, since Genesis 12, there have been two sections of humanity.

There have been the descendants of Abraham and there have been the descendants of the rest. And humanity has been divided into those two. But actually, God had always intended there to be one humanity.

One humanity who line up behind the new Adam. Jesus Christ. One new humanity together. And this happens how?

[8 : 00] In Christ Jesus, through the gospel. This is the key to everything Paul says in chapters 1 to 3. And it lies the foundation for what he's about to say in chapter 4, which is our passage for today.

So turn to chapter 4. Now I want you to notice how Paul starts. It's a very important word for Paul. It's a little word, therefore. And notice what he says.

He starts with the words, I, therefore. Now I think that the therefore refers back to the whole of chapters 1 to 3. He's saying something like this. In the light of everything I've been working up to up to this point, in the light of the last three chapters, in the light of God's great plan that I've just outlined for you, I, Paul, the prisoner of the Lord, beg you to lead a life worthy of this calling to which you have been called, of the calling to which you have been called.

And what do you reckon that calling is? What is the calling that we all have? It is the calling to be Christian. It is the calling to be members of this new humanity lined up behind Jesus Christ, forged out of Jews and Gentiles, thrown together.

That unity is mapped out for us in verses 4 to 6. Have a look at it. They're magic verses, really. It is a unity that Paul uses, sorry, describes using the divine number of seven.

[9 : 27] It's a whole and complete number. And it involves the Trinity. Can you see the Trinity there? He says, this is a unity where Jew and Gentile are bound together in one body where there's one spirit, one hope, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all who is above all and through all and in all.

Can you see what he's saying? He's saying, that secret plan now revealed has been physically launched by God in time and space. That secret hidden in God's eternal mind has a pilot project here on earth and it is us.

It is the church. For there, in the church of God, there are people from every nation, every background, and they are bound together in a unity which the triune God has forged that rises above any differences of religion, of nationality, of background, of age, of sex, of culture, bound together by the triune God.

God's eternity, God's eternal plan that heaven itself will be like has invaded earth in his little pilot project. Well, actually, it's a pretty big pilot project now, but nevertheless, it was a little pilot project, wasn't it?

And in the church, God is parading before the world his final goal for his creation.

[10 : 58] All things summed up together under his son. All humans bound together by him into one, tied together by a peace that has been won in Christ Jesus through the gospel.

Friends, this morning we launched a new congregation here at Holy Trinity and it was full of Chinese people, Mandarin speakers. I couldn't understand a word that was going on except the words I said.

But you know what? It was a very emotional moment. Why? Because here are Mandarin speakers, here is me, Andrew, the Australian of Scottish origin and here we are together worshipping the same God.

here from cultures so disparate from the other side of, you know, you know, if we think of my origins from, you know, Scotland somewhere right through to China somewhere bound together by the same God worshipping the same God.

They had come to know Jesus just as I had come to know him. Friends, do you know how incredible that is? And here bound together in the same church.

[12 : 12] this end time outpost, this pilot project is God's means for making known the multifaceted wisdom to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly places.

That's what Paul said back in Ephesians 3 verse 10. Now notice something. Look again at verses 1 to 6. Paul acknowledges the unity, the church is a unity in its calling.

However, you have to maintain that unity. unity. It needs to be worked at. It requires God's people to lead a life worthy of the calling to which they have been called. That is, they've got to work at keeping that unity.

You see, friends, we have to do that here at Holy Trinity. We have to work hard at making sure that we don't divide our church into Chinese and English speaking, Mandarin speaking and English speaking.

No, we are one together in Christ. Now, for functional reasons we may meet differently because we use different first languages, but, no, we have to work towards where we are together because that is how God has created.

[13 : 12] We must maintain the unity and the bond of peace. It requires work and what are you going to have to do if that's going to be the case? Well, Paul tells you it will require three characteristics. Can you see them there in those verses?

Humility, gentleness and patience and perhaps even a third, a fourth, acceptance. Friends, hear this word of God.

Here at Holy Trinity we are a snapshot of God's eternal purposes in his world. We are representatives together of his new humanity, bound together by him into one, tied together by the peace that has been won in Christ Jesus through the gospel and this end time outpost of which we are a little snapshot, this pilot project is God's way of making his name known in the world.

in us, God is demonstrating what the gospel about his son can do. Friends, this is not a sort of divine multiculturalism. If I can put it this way, it's a divine monoculturalism where the things that bind us together are far more dominant than the things that split us apart, such as skin colour and sex and age and so on.

The gospel concerning Jesus Christ has forged us into a single culture that overrides our differences so that we can say Jesus is Lord together, whether we are black, white, cream, whatever, you know, we together can say Jesus is Lord.

[14 : 45] That is an incredible thing. Friends, as God's gospel-centred church, God's gospel-centred people, God's gospel-centred new humanity, we have more in common than we have differences.

I've been to lots of parts in the world and you know, there is nothing like meeting another Christian in another part of the world who's got totally different culture, totally different skin colour, totally different language, but there is a commonality between us that when we meet we say, yes, Jesus is Lord and it binds us together immediately.

Friends, we have come from many different backgrounds here today. We differ in all sorts of ways and in the days ahead we will undoubtedly have differences with each other and in the days ahead we will say, well I don't agree with you on this and that matter and so on, but we must not allow these things to overthrow the essential unity we have in Christ Jesus through the gospel.

Let's decide to work diligently at what binds us together, not which separates us. We are God's gospel-centered, Christ-centered people. So let's give priority to Jesus and to the things that bind us together and as we work together on the unity that binds us, we will proclaim to Doncaster the world and even the heavenly powers themselves his multifaceted wisdom.

Now friends, that's a fair bulk of our talk tonight, but I want you to now have a look at verses 7 to 11. Let's turn with me to that.

[16 : 28] Now, 1 to 6 have stressed our unity, 7 to 11 stress our diversity. You see, although we are one in Christ, although we're bound together in the gospel, although there's one body, one spirit, one faith, one Lord, one baptism, one God and Father of all, there is an irresistible diversity among us as well and this diversity comes from God as well and he has made us one, but he's also made us diverse.

Look at verse 7, having focused on the big picture, he now concentrates on each one of us and he tells us, look, God has given grace to each one of you according to the measure of Christ's gifts.

You see, God has given us gifts and to support this contention he quotes from Psalm 68 and I won't go through the details, but I want to tell you what I think is going on. He says, Paul talks about Jesus descending and I think that refers to him coming to earth in the incarnation, becoming a human being.

Then he talks about Jesus ascending. I think that means after he died he went back up to heaven and God raised him from the dead and seated him in the heavenly places. And so what he's really saying is Jesus became a human being and then he ascended to heaven to a sovereign ruler of all of God's humanity.

And then third thing, do you notice what he says? He said he gives gifts to his church. Now I want you to notice those gifts there. Have a look at them and sort of do that little Sesame Street thing, you know.

[17 : 58] What is common between all of these things? How does that little thing go? One of these things is the same as the other or whatever it is. Yeah, which one, what is the common thing between them all?

apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors, teachers, there's lots of debate about these verses.

I think the general thrust is clear. Apostles and prophets probably refer to the same people mentioned earlier on in Ephesians, that is who first received and then passed on the message, proclaimed the message of Jesus.

And evangelists, pastors, teachers, church workers who go about proclaiming and explaining and teaching the ramifications of what Jesus has done and said. And because of the original way the language is constructed, I used to think pastors and teachers were one gift, but I think probably they're gifts that overlap.

So a pastor and a teacher overlaps, but it doesn't really matter that much. What is the common thing between them? They are all speaking gifts. that is they all are declaring what God has done in Christ or its implications.

[19 : 11] So some speak to tell you what God has done. Some persuade people to become Christians, evangelists. Some speak to nurture Christians in their faith. Some speak to teach people what the faith is all about, but they all are speaking gifts.

All speak of Christ. All speak of God's great mystery in Jesus Christ through the gospel. And these foundational speaking gifts have a common element. They are all gifts of speaking.

Friends, I want to tell you that this is one of the key reasons that I came here to Holy Trinity to be your pastor and teacher. You see, long before I came here, you had a reputation for being a church that loves hearing God's word explained.

You see, and I know that many of you love hearing God's word explained because you know that life and witness and ministry is founded on God's word and you love God's word.

But I want you to notice what Paul says here. He focuses on these speaking gifts. He knows they're foundational. He knows that Jesus knows they're foundational. But these speaking gifts are not an end in themselves.

[20 : 22] They are not an end in themselves. Bible knowledge is never an end in itself. If you sit here and you take on sermons and you spout them back to others, but you do not put it into practice, you have missed the boat.

Bible knowledge is not an end in itself. And in verses 12 to 16, he tells us the goal that Bible teaching has. And again, there's all sorts of debate about these verses.

We won't worry about it too much. But I want to tell you how verses 11 and 12 function. So see if you can stick with me on this. Can you see what he's saying? He says, Jesus gave these gifts for, you could indent it if you like, so Jesus gave these gifts for the equipping of the saints, for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ.

I wonder if you can see what's going on. Paul is telling us ministers of God's word are given by Christ. They are given by Christ to equip believers to exercise their own gifts of ministry ministry in Christian service and through this, God's goal for the whole church will be accomplished.

And then in verse 13 he tells us, well what is this goal? It is this, unity and maturity. God gave gifts to equip all God's people to exercise their own gifts, to build up the body of Christ, that is the church, until we reach the unity of the faith and the knowledge of the Son of God and grow into a maturity that is measured by the full stature of Christ.

[21 : 51] Please hear what I'm saying. You see, as I speak to you now, as your pastor and teacher, God's doing a construction work. He's about building.

He's equipping you. He's equipping you for works of service, not just to learn a bit more about the Bible, but he's equipping you for works of service. And he's equipping you for works of service, why?

So that the body of Christ here at Holy Trinity and throughout the world might be built up. That's what God's doing here as I'm preaching. He's not just giving you an exercise in intellectual excitement or deadness.

No, no. He wants you to be equipped for the ministry of the gospel so that his church might be built up. And the final goal is threefold.

Unity in the faith and the knowledge of God's Son. Growth in maturity and a maturity that's measured by the full stature of Christ. Christ. That is what God is aiming at for us and with us.

[22 : 56] He wants us to be united in the faith and the knowledge of his Son. He wants us to be a new mature humanity. He wants our maturity to be measured by the full stature of Christ.

That is what he's saying is I want you to be like the Jesus that you worship. That's the positive way of putting things. The negative way is in verses 14 to 16.

Have a look at them. You see the other way of putting things is well look the reason we have these teaching gifts is because God doesn't want us to be children that are sort of tossed here and there by every false doctrine.

And so he provides us with teachers who are the supporting ligaments that cause us to be fitted and knitted together. So you see our teachers here whether they're Bible study group leaders or whether they're preachers or whether they're pastors or what is God's purpose?

They're ligaments. That bind us as the body of Christ together. And by our speaking the truth in love to each other we grow into him who is the head even Christ.

[24 : 02] Let me return to the point that I made earlier on. It's a good thing that we at Holy Trinity love hearing the Bible taught. And you can you know I'm sure dissect what is being taught.

It's good isn't it? Why? Because it's where growth starts. But it's not where growth finishes. The goal of hearing the Bible taught is that we reflect it in how we live our lives.

That we reflect what we have heard from God in our lives. It is that our lives change. Do you know when you came here tonight you know what God's purpose was for you?

That you would walk out having changed. Either in your thinking or in your actions or preferably both. That's what God's goal was for you tonight.

That you would change. That you hear God's word you respond to it and say I'm going to go and I'm going to change in this way and I'm going to ask God to help me do that. It is the teaching of God's word is designed to change your life.

[25 : 07] And it happens whether I say it or you say it to each other. Whether we speak the truth to each other. When we speak the truth to each other hopefully God is at work to change us.

The speaking gifts God gives his church are to result in every one of us speaking to each other. You see you are to be teachers of each other.

The right of Hebrews says that. You are to speak to each other about God. Not just about the coffee. Not just about La Porquette later on. Not just about who's going to win tonight.

Not just about the things that happened in your week. You are to speak to each other about God. Let the word of God dwell in you richly. As you admonish one another as psalms and hymns and spiritual songs even our music is meant to do that.

We are to speak in love to each other. We are to teach one another. We are to train one another. And in doing so and we do so until we all attain to the unity of the faith in the knowledge of the Son of God.

[26 : 17] Till we reflect a whole new humanity and the world says they're a new lot of people. And until we are full reflection of Christ's fullness. So let me wrap up by remind you about where we've been over the last four weeks.

We've done some hard work. Remember first week Romans 1 verses 1 to 6 we saw that the gospel is about God's great purposes for his world. And God is a gospel centred God.

So that's week one. Week two we looked at Romans 1 verses 16 and 17 we saw the gospel is God's message about what he's done in Christ and it's the power to save.

Last week we looked at Ephesians 1 to 3 and we saw God's gospel centred plan was formed from before the world began and it had humanity in mind and it stretched to the very gates of heaven and hell.

It was a plan that was cosmic in its proportion and execution. This week we've looked at Ephesians 4 and we found that God's gospel centred plan has a pilot project which is the church that is us.

[27 : 22] And through the church God is proclaiming his multifaceted wisdom to all the heavenly powers and for that message to be heard some work is needed. God's people need to work hard on the unity they have in Christ and they need to listen to speaking gifts.

Those speaking gifts are the ligaments of Christ's body, the church. But for the body of Christ to really be built up, it's not enough to just have teaching.

Each one of us has to listen to that teaching and act on it. We're to be engaged in the work of ministry ourselves, involved in building up the body of Christ. Friends, if you're a Christian, that is what God has called you to be.

Someone who builds up the body of Christ. Don't rely on me doing it. We're to push together until we all reach the unity of the faith, the knowledge of God's Son, and grow into that new humanity.

Now let me just try and push it home just a little more tonight. I'm very glad that I'm here as your pastor teacher. I love being here. However, I want to tell you that as I read the scriptures, I've come to the conclusion that the work of ministry here at Holy Trinity is not my ministry.

[28 : 33] Actually, I did know that before I came, but nevertheless, I've been reminded. The work of ministry here at Holy Trinity is your ministry. It is your ministry. I am not here to do ministry for you.

Jono is not here to do ministry for you. Andrew Price is not here to do ministry for you. Our Chinese staff are not here to do ministry for you. I am here and they are here to be your pastor teachers.

I am here to train and equip you. If you are depending on me to do ministry here, then let me tell you, you will be let down. The task is not mine.

The task is yours. It is ours is probably a better way of putting it. It's not as though it's not mine. It is mine, but it's mine as much as it is yours.

And more importantly, if I can put it this way, the task is actually God's. So let's join together with God in this great gospel, Christ centred project he's got.

[29 : 42] Friends, that's part of why we're going to change things here at Holy Trinity over the next six months or so in this congregation. And we've started tonight. The people you will see up front will not be me or Jono, but you.

That is, we will be, Jono and I will still be your pastor teachers, but I want to involve you in ministry here. Not just me.

Because that's what we are. We are together, God's people. Together, ministering together. And so the faces up the front here will be your faces.

As the faces in your small groups will be your faces. There will be you leading the service as it were. you will be involved in planning the service. Not all of you, but a number of you.

You will be involved in all aspects of serving each other. Why? Because this is not my task. It is our task. And I want to do it together with you.

[30 : 44] So this is our task together, so that together we might grow into that maturity that reflects the fullness of Christ. So let's pray. Father God, we pray that you might help us to work together to listen to your word taught, that we might be equipped for the work of ministry, so that the body of Christ might be built up until we all come to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to maturity, to the measure of the full stature of Christ.

Help us to be no longer children, tossed to and fro and blown about by every wind of doctrine, by people's trickery or by craftiness of deceitful scheming.

we pray that we might be those who speak the truth in love and grow up in every way into him who is the head that is into Christ, from whom the whole body is joined and knit together by every ligament with which it is equipped, as each part is working properly and promotes the body's growth in the building up of itself in love.

We pray that we might do this so that the Lord Jesus might be known and proclaimed and your multifaceted wisdom made known in the heavenly places. And we pray this in Jesus' name.

Amen.