

The Meaning And Mystery Of The Church

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[0 : 00] That's where we hold full circle. And so this man is a product of that church. Craig, by way of a sort of an introduction, I wanted to ask you something about a paper that you once wrote on G.K. Chesterton.

Would you tell us something about that? I'm not sure who set you up to this, but I'm doing a thesis on G.K. Chesterton on his social ethics. For anyone who has a passing acquaintance with G.K. Chesterton, you usually think of him as a rather large, jovial journalist who wrote the Father Brown Mysteries, which he also did.

But he also was very involved as a journalist in developing social thought, and he deliberately developed a social thought that he tried to go down the middle, based on Christian social thinking, that was neither capitalist nor socialist, and by so doing managed to offend most of the people in England.

And I, who equally am prone to wanting to offend people, have been fascinated with it ever since. Craig, I'd like to just pray for you as we start.

Let's pray together. Lord Jesus, this evening as Craig speaks to us, would his words be your words, and would you open our hearts to the things that he has to say to us in your gospel?

[1 : 16] In Jesus' name, amen. I don't know about you, but I often have a very minor sense of apprehension when I see somebody I don't know mounting a pulpit.

Because one can never be quite sure what a preacher is going to do to you. In the fairly conservative Baptist church in which I became a Christian, the sign for me is that the person getting up into the pulpit had white shoes.

I knew I was in trouble. And you may have some sort of preconceptions of what I am. Perhaps the word Baptist might do something to you. You might think that Baptists are the sorts of people who go down on water slides to raise money for PTL or something.

I recently saw a cartoon in Newsweek magazine. And as you know, the Pope recently visited the United States. And there was a picture of this figure speeding off and disappearing into the background wearing a suit and a large Bible under one arm and some sort of inflatable device about his waist and some little ducky sort of thing on the front.

And the Pope and an aide, a priest of some sort, sitting there quite shaken like they'd just been knocked off their path. And Tiara was askew. He says, ah, yes, Your Holiness, that was the Reverend Jerry Falwell.

[2 : 35] And anyways, let me put your mind to at ease. I'm not that sort of a Baptist. The fact that I'm young could also fill you with misgivings. In my experience, young preachers are the sorts of people who don't get into the pulpit often enough.

And sort of everything that they've ever wanted to say, they think this is their one opportunity and they'll harangue you for 45 minutes or so. I hope that that will not be the case. I also hope I won't go to the other extreme.

There's a preacher who, after his sermon, had a friend visiting him and says, ah, well, what did you think of my sermon? So it was short. Well, I don't like being tedious.

Ah, but it was. Anyways, I hope to... I hope in sharing with you that I fail to reach either of those extremes. Could we pause just a second once more for prayer?

Fathers, we go to your word. We pray that that which is from you will remain, that which is merely the words of your servant will pass away, and that the words of my mouth and the meditations of all of our hearts would be acceptable in your sight.

[3 : 39] Amen. This passage is incredibly deep, moving, and cosmic. It's one of those passages that was written by any lesser figure than the Apostle Paul himself.

One would have suspected that he had been chewing funny mushrooms before he went to his prayers. The vision that Paul gives in Ephesians is a cosmic vision, a very grand and lofty vision, worthy of a first century A.D.

Steven Spielberg in his account of the tremendous otherness of Christ and the cosmic significance of the Gospels. And for that reason this evening, I found it very interesting as I approached the Scripture.

And you may have found, as you've been going through Ephesians, and if you haven't, let me tell you, that Ephesians is very unique amongst Paul's writings, that many of the themes he takes up and the way he develops them are quite unlike the rest of his epistles.

We do not find here the great struggle of law and grace that we find, at least not the same way, in Paul's other epistles. We do not find here, like we do in Romans, the solitary struggle of the Christian soul as it wrestles with its liberty in Christ, as it discovers the power of sola fide, faith alone, sola gratia, grace alone.

[5 : 01] Here we do not find the image of a Martin Luther standing up and saying, Here stehe ich, ich kann nicht anders. Here I stand, I can do no other. This is not the message.

This is not the Apostle Paul that we find in Ephesians. This is not the Apostle Paul of the Christian standing nakedly before God and being held accountable to respond to this magnificent grace. Rather, the Paul that we find in the book of Ephesians is not the Paul of the I, but the Paul of the we. It's not the I standing before God, but it's the we, the corporate community, the church, as we relate to God.

And this is the source of the imagery in this section of Scripture, Ephesians chapter 3. And in this great chapter, I'm afraid that I'm not going to allow us time to digest because we only have one evening, so I'm afraid that I will have to graze the Scriptures this evening and pray that it will inspire you to chew your own cud on your own time.

It's an incredibly rich passage. And as Paul begins, he talks about the mystery of the church. And what he says the mystery of the church is, is that Jew and Gentile alike are the co-heirs of God.

[6 : 27] Let's try and, let's try and unpack that. Paul is saying that the very intent of God, the mystery of God that he has planned from before time, is that Jew and Gentile might together know what it means to be in Christ.

two millennia after the New Testament era when we are now a Gentile church. That does not strike us in its power. But what Paul is saying is that it is the unity of the church, not just Jew and Gentile, slave and free, male and female, all the divisions and alienations that separate people in our society.

It's the unification and healing of these splits that is the mystery of God. And then he goes on in chapter 10 to make a very, very cosmic statement.

His intent was that now through the church the manifold wisdom of God should be made to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly realms. There's a great deal of ink spilt around this particular verse.

And from, considering that this is from the profession that brought you the question how many angels can dance on the head of a pen, you can imagine what theologians are capable of producing.

[7 : 47] But basically, the struggle over this verse consists of two groups of people. Those who read this and say, yeah, manifold wisdom should God mean to the rulers and authorities, to the powers and the principalities which God's going to tear down.

People who read this in a very revolutionary way. People say, that's right, that's what the gospel's about. We're going to tear down the powers and the principalities and the authorities and we're going to declare the liberation in Jesus Christ.

On the other side, tut tut, let's not get so hasty about it. After all, it says, rules and authorities in the heavenly realms. He was talking about angels. And basically, what we should be doing here is praying, not preparing for the revolution.

And betwixt these two extremes, I would like to suggest to you that the truth of the scripture is a little bit of both. Paul says, the mystery of the church is to declare our unity in Jesus Christ to the powers and the principalities.

What are the powers and principalities? Elsewhere, in Paul's writings, he speaks of Christ having overcome the powers and the principalities in his cross.

[9 : 00] He speaks of it to the powers and the principalities that have led Christ to the cross. And I would say to you that the first level of meaning that the powers and the principalities are what the Christian faith has affirmed in the otherness of life.

That behind the appearance of life as we receive it, there are spiritual powers. There are spiritual realities. The church militant is involved in a spiritual struggle with great powers of evil. However, I would like to suggest to you that except in those rare circumstances where in the history of the church and in people's experience, people have encountered direct demonic activity and the church has responded in exorcism ceremonies, which I'm not going to get into tonight, that except for those rare occurrences, I would suggest to you that we encounter powers and principalities of evil only in a very indirect way and only as manifested through the structures of society that we live in.

Let me get concrete. If we think about Stalin's Russia, an absolute horrible, horrible, evil society, we don't know how many people disappeared.

The stories are still coming out of deliberate famines created in the Ukraine in order to foster his program of collectivizing the land. One of the old Bolsheviks who survived the Stalinist purges was asked, why didn't you do something?

[10 : 27] Why didn't you say something? Why didn't you stop this man? He responded, how could we? All of us had blood on our hands. A structural evil.

Well-meaning people caught within the structure of their day that was so permeated with evil that none of them were innocent enough to stand up in spite. This was a structural evil despite all their intents where society itself had gone so bad and there was evil taking place in such a deep nature that no individual personally could stop it.

South Africa is another example. If anyone is familiar with the history of that country, you will know that apartheid was not erected by evil people. Apartheid was erected by decent, God-fearing, religious, and committed people who honestly thought that they were doing the black peoples of South Africa a favor in erecting apartheid.

But yet we know centuries after the horrendous evil effects that that system has on the people of that country. How it destroys families. How it creates a tremendously wealthy society for very few and a not-so-wealthy society for the vast majority.

But it's a structural evil. It wasn't created by evil people. Not intentionally. But it exists. And it's become codified and embodied and institutionalized.

[11 : 53] And it's an evil. I could use the example of the arms race. Now, despite the political opinions of probably most of you here, I would say that is Ronald Reagan an evil man?

I'd have to say no. Ronald Reagan is not an evil man. But I would also respond that I don't think Gorbachev is an evil man. And I don't think that most of the people working in the Pentagon and the Russian military establishment are evil men.

or women. But nonetheless, we live in a world in which we spend a half trillion dollars a year on armaments. Each side managing to put out about three bombs a day.

Start counting cities in clusters of three and think about how many of them we actually need. While people starve in Ethiopia. Now, this is a structural evil. No one sat down and said, I'm going to spend a half trillion dollars on armaments while we let the third world starve.

But there are tremendous evils that exist in our society which we as individuals can't touch. Not easily. And I think what the Apostle Paul is saying here, in part, that the Christian's ministry, the church, is through breaking apart the barriers of society to declare the liberation of Christ to the powers and the principalities.

[13 : 13] That this is not simply a movement of political liberation. It's a spiritual battle. What would have happened? How would the world have been different if the Russian Orthodox Church at the turn of the century had sided with the peasants long before the Bolsheviks took over in that country?

What happened if the church had insisted to the government that they begin to democratize and to engage in land distribution, land reform for the poor? What would have happened if the church had done that at the very time when Joseph Song was a young seminarian studying for the priesthood? What would have happened if the church had sided with the poor then? How would the world be different? How would the world be different if Pic Bota and Desmond Tutu met and prayed in the same church?

Can the walls that divide us remain when the church is experiencing the unity that comes from the redemption in Christ? And I believe this is part of what Paul is telling us.

The mystery of the church is that the church is within itself to break down the walls of separation that keep groups of people apart and by so doing engage in a spiritual battle to witness to the forces of the world which seek to divide our society and to divide our churches and fracture us and split us apart.

[14 : 43] Paul said it so clearly in Galatians 3.28 In Christ Jesus there's neither male nor free slave male nor female slave nor free Jew nor Gentile and Paul clearly understood that the meaning of the cross is that in the church those barriers are broken down.

I don't know your church First Baptist Church is a downtown church it is the only place I know where millionaires and bag ladies might have to rub shoulders on Sunday morning.

It is the only place I know where Socrates and NDPs might have to be civil with each other on a Sunday morning. It's the only place I know where white Anglo-Saxon Protestants may meet people from other cultures and deal with them as equals and as brothers.

That is the meaning of the church. That is the mystery of the church. And the church fails to witness to the powers and the principalities when we start reflecting our society rather than through the cross symbolically witnessing against our society and witnessing to our oneness and our unity in Christ.

That is one point of the mystery of the church. The second if I may graze further through the chapter verse 17 so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith and I pray that you being rooted and established in love may have the power to grasp of all the saints how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith.

[16 : 36] The mystery of the church. I want you to put aside every cliché in your mind that you have ever heard about being or becoming a Christian. Let's put aside saved, let's put aside being born again, let's put aside being washed in the blood.

Sounds like a first century mystery cult. Put aside all of these various things that we have used to try to explain what it means to become Christian and all of which have taken on emotional and cultural baggage, most of it negative.

And think for just a second on Paul's words so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith. for a second. Let's think about putting aside the very careful facades that we manufacture to make it look like we're together and we have no anxieties and no pains and all is right with the world.

Let's put aside the hurry, the rush, the bustle, the solemn, the desperate noise of our solemn assemblies, the accoutrements, the toys which we surround ourselves to put off ultimate questions and meaning and let us stop just slow enough, slow down just enough that the silence with which God pursues us might be able to catch up.

[18 : 02] And think of the mystery of the church, that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith. This also is the mystery of the church, not just to witness to the world, to the powers and the structures, but in our very being together, corporately, to experience the presence of Christ in our midst.

All of us can think of times when the world is so much with us that we rush about like squirrels in a cage trying desperately to get things done and forgetting Wesley's maxim that I have so much to do today that I'll have to pray for an extra hour.

And when we know that when we actually stop and do that, that when we do stop to pray and let Christ dwell in us richly through faith, that the adrenaline slows down, the mind clears, and a small, still voice empowers us to live the life corporately as the church.

But I also want to point out that this is not an individual spirituality. this is not me and Jesus. Paul is here talking about the spirituality of the church.

We, the people of God, are together called to let Christ dwell in us richly through faith. This also is the mystery of the church.

[19 : 35] and finally, in verse 18, may have power together with all the saints to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ.

Well, how long and how wide and how high and how deep is the love of Christ? does Christ love people with AIDS?

Does Christ love homosexuals? As a Canadian nationalist, does Christ love Americans? And does Christ love Russians? Does Christ love the poor?

Does Christ love people on welfare? Does Christ love the rich? Does Christ love American generals in the Pentagon? Does Christ love Russian generals in the Kremlin?

Once the question is asked, the answer automatically suggests itself. And once we begin to reflect on how high and how broad and how deep is the love of Christ, our fabrications and our pictures and the stereotypes and the pigeonholes that allow us to get a grip on people begin to melt away. [20 : 57] And we begin to see that they are pigeonholes and the pigeonholes are for pigeons and not for people. once we have realized, once we've asked the question, there's a counter question that comes back to us.

It has one, a question that demands of us new ways of thinking and new ways of acting. We live in a society that very carefully makes certain that it ghettoizes people who think the same, speak the same language, have the same color, and have the same economic standing.

sometimes they're called zoning laws. And I speak not flippantly, if you study North American cities, there is a part of the city that people make darn sure that people don't cross.

That people with the boxes on the hillside make sure that they've got their plot, and the people who don't have the boxes on the hillside make sure they go across the tracks, cross, or across Main Street, or across the Fraser River, or whatever the demarcations are.

And we do not often meet people who are different from us. It's very easy to become very homogenized Christians, where we only meet people of our own status, our own rank, our own color.

[22 : 14] And again, this comes back to the mystery of the church. How high and how deep and wide and high is the love of Christ? And once we've asked that question, it's going to radically affect our thinking in a number of areas.

I dare say that whether you're on the right or whether you're on the left, it's going to change your politics. If once one is determined that the love of Christ encompasses Native Indians, it's going to make it very different on how we read the paper on Native land claims.

If once we have decided, and those who know me know I lean a little left, if once I have decided that Christ loves the rich, well, doesn't that mean that I'm going to think a little bit differently perhaps about some of my own politics, that I have to think what loving the rich means.

Once we've asked the question, our politics and our worldview have to change. But not only that, our concept of the church has to change. Mother Teresa, who needs no introduction, commented, being unwanted, unloved, uncared for, forgotten by everybody, I think that that is a much greater hunger, a much greater poverty than the person who has nothing to eat.

We must find each other. The mystery of the church is the church has to find each other. It's very easy to only be with the people we know, the people we've grown up with, the people who have the same education, the people who have the same socioeconomic standing, the people who drive the same types of cars.

[23 : 51] We generally tend to look down upon people who have less than us and who have more than us. We simultaneously look down upon those with beat-up rattle traps and those who are driving brand-new BMWs.

And Christ says that we have to reach out beyond those who are just like us. We have to reach out first to each other. this is going to have an effect on our concept of evangelism.

You are having an outreach next week. You are being invited to invite people to a place where they may be able to encounter Christ. Once we have asked how high and how wide and how deep the love of Jesus is, it might mean that we're going to think twice, three times, about who we're going to ask.

Not just perhaps the person in the office or the classroom who we could personally gain status from if they become a Christian. But perhaps the desperately lonely person, the person who is hard to get along with, the person who is hard to love, that may be the person that God is calling us to invite to these meetings.

Our concept of evangelism is going to change as well because we're going to realize that we are calling people not to pray a prayer, not to become a Christian, but we are calling people to the family of God, to the church of Jesus Christ, which is the mystery of God in operation in our world.

[25 : 22] C.S. Lewis in the Screwtape Letters, which if not well known to you, I envy you because I'd love to read it for the first time again. In talking about the best way to tempt human beings, the letters from a senior to a junior devil, talking about the church, all your patient sees is the half-finished sham Gothic erection on the new building estate.

defend us from all perils and dangers of this night.

For the love of thy only Son, our Savior, Jesus Christ. And then can we say together the Lord's Prayer. Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name.

Thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is from heaven. Give us this day our daily bread, and forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those that trespass against us.

[33 : 40] And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom, the power and the glory, forever and ever. Amen.

Please be seated. Will you kneel?

After, Lord, in your mercy, you respond to hear our prayer. Let us pray. Heavenly Father, we thank you that as we worship you this evening, you know our hearts and minds, and you want to make yourself known to us.

Give us the courage. We have them love you. Kate. ■■■ible■Roy. Please relax. Serve us. Why me? Let us pray. Won't you know our hearts and others, and we let us pray?

Please do love you. Save us. Oooh. May God bless you. Amen. I'll see you. Listen to me. Bye-bye. lys tiered. Holmes. I won't ask you.

[34 : 47] I'll come back. Take care. When do you kami?