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# The Secret of God's Plan

## (Studies in Ephesians)

MARTIN H. SCHARLEMANN

### PREFATORY OBSERVATIONS

Verse 9 of chapter 1 of Ephesians provides a good general title to highlight one basic theological emphasis of the letter. There the Greek, literally translated, makes reference to "the mystery of His will." The Revised Standard Version in this case retains just that wording from the Authorized Version.

The New English Bible chose to render the Greek as God's "hidden purpose." The Beck translation offers "the hidden meaning of His will." *Good News for Modern Man* speaks of it as "the secret plan" which God decided to complete in Christ. Regardless of the precise way in which the phrase is turned, it offers a succinct formulation of the burden of the epistle that has come down to us as "To the Ephesians." For what we have before us is a treatise on God's purpose for the universe as that secret of His was revealed in Christ and is being implemented by the church.

The bare statement of the theme of Ephesians is enough to alert us to the fact that we are here dealing with a document which Samuel Taylor Coleridge was moved to call "one of the sublimest compositions

of man."<sup>1</sup> The sacred writer deals with nothing less than the movement of all created things toward an ultimate oneness in Christ Jesus. His vision is cosmic. He starts his argument with a statement of God's decision "before the foundation of the world" and carries it forward through "the fullness of the times" to that moment when the lordship of Christ embraces "all things in heaven and on earth."

Ephesians speaks with particular force to our day. Men have grown tired of loneliness. The splendor has fled from Christian individualism. As a matter of fact, we now recognize its accents as potentially disruptive, catering to the ego rather than fostering the community. Almost four decades ago Emil Brunner called individualism "the disease of our times."<sup>2</sup> Once more we are learning the truth of Wilhelm Loehe's remarks: "We are born for fellowship. . . . The divine fellowship is the Church of God, the communion of saints. . . . On my pilgrimage through this dark vale I am not alone. . . . The Church is an eternal fellowship here and hereafter."<sup>3</sup>

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*The author is graduate professor of exegesis at Concordia Seminary, St. Louis. This essay is one in a series that has behind it the benefit of discussions at various pastoral conferences of our Synod. All four were read at a sequence of professional development seminars held for Air Force chaplains in different parts of the world. In 1968 the St. Louis faculty heard them at its fall retreat.*

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<sup>1</sup> Quoted by Theodore Wedel in his exposition of Ephesians, *The Interpreter's Bible*, X (New York: Abingdon, 1953), 610.

<sup>2</sup> Emil Brunner, *The Word and the World* (New York: Scribner's, 1931), p. 118.

<sup>3</sup> Wilhelm Loehe, *Three Books Concerning the Church* (Reading, Pa.: Pilger Publishing House, 1908), pp. 3—4. The key sentence in Loehe's own words is the following: "Aber auch ein Verlangen nach Gemeinschaft mit andern Menschen ist uns eingeboren, und es tritt gerade



Our generation cries desperately for a sense of community and for some feeling of continuity. Somewhere, somehow we should like to discover a measure of coherence for our existence. Rival ideologies are abroad in the world, offering direction, meaning, and fellowship. To all of us, living in an age of separation and aloneness, comes the cry from Ephesians: "But God has a plan for oneness to prevail everywhere."

As we work with Ephesians we shall discover that the God whose eternal purpose is at work in our history is not one who is content with being merely an object of our reflections. He confronts us to act. He Himself acts and speaks. He judges; hence He can also save. In whatever way we may know Him, and to whatever degree He has revealed Himself to us, He always remains the subject of what our reading and our meditation may yield. In fact, He keeps acting as the God of unity through the proclamation of the Gospel and the use of the sacraments. Ephesians offers us the basic structure which humanity needs for the true expression of communal life. The church has been called to exhibit and offer that design. She exists for this purpose.

#### SOME INTRODUCTORY CONSIDERATIONS

Before taking up certain pericopes from Ephesians, a few words about its name and authorship are in order. It was not always called "To the Ephesians." The title is an editorial addition, probably dating from the time when the Pauline letters were first

assembled as a corpus. Calling this particular document "Ephesians" was probably a partial mistake arising out of the surprising discovery that no Pauline letter could be found for that congregation in whose midst he had worked longest.

It is generally agreed today that the words "in Ephesus" were not in the original text of verse one. It seems that a blank was left at this point for the reason that the letter was intended to be sent to a number of congregations. Tychicus, the scribe and bearer of the letter, was expected to insert the proper designation at each place where the letter was read to a particular Christian congregation.

In the middle of the second century Marcion listed a letter known as "To the Laodiceans."<sup>4</sup> The way this epistle is referred to suggests that it may have been the one we know as "Ephesians." The occurrence of the name Laodicea in Marcion's attempt at a canonical listing has prompted some scholars to propose that the title might refer to the document mentioned at the end of Colossians as "the letter from Laodicea" (Col. 4:16b). This does not seem to be the case, however. If we follow the brilliant demonstration of John Knox, we shall conclude that the "letter from Laodicea" referred to in Colossians was really the one we know as Philemon, whose purpose it was to persuade Aristarchus of Laodicea to get involved in the project of releasing Onesimus for service to Paul.<sup>5</sup> In that case, there is little connection be-

dann am meisten hervor, wenn wir bereits den Herrn gefunden haben. Die Bekehrung zum Herrn macht die Einsamen gesellig." See *Drei Buecher von der Kirche* (Stuttgart: Liesching, 1845), pp. 5—6.

<sup>4</sup> See Alfred Wikenhauser, *New Testament Introduction* (New York: Herder and Herder, 1965), p. 425.

<sup>5</sup> John Knox, *Philemon Among the Letters of Paul* (New York: Abingdon, 1959), pp. 56—70.



tween our "Ephesians" and the document mentioned in Colossians.

It is just possible that Marcion had in mind the letter we have before us. He may well have had a copy in which the word "Laodicea" filled the blank space. Under any circumstances, Ephesians reads like an encyclical letter. It is rather impersonal and general in tone and content. Some decades ago Goodspeed therefore proposed that this epistle was designed to serve as a kind of covering letter for the whole Pauline corpus, and that this group of letters was assembled in Ephesus under the guidance of Onesimus, a later bishop in that city. In that case, Goodspeed suggested, the bishop himself may have written it on the basis of his understanding of the apostle's other letters.<sup>6</sup>

This is a guess, however. While of course it is possible that Paul himself did not personally write Ephesians and that it ought to be called deuterio-Pauline, the arguments set forth to sustain this view, while very strong, are not fully decisive.<sup>7</sup>

As far as our present study is concerned, we shall speak of Ephesians as Pauline. At the same time we shall remain fully aware of the fact that for a little more than 130 years the solid tradition of apostolic authorship deriving from the second century has been challenged by various people. For our purposes we shall hold that Paul wrote Ephesians at about the time he composed Colossians and Philemon, and that he sent it with Tychicus as a circular letter to a small group of communities in the hin-

terland of Ephesus, including the cities of Hierapolis and Laodicea. When it was taken up into the Pauline corpus, a copy of it may have been available at Ephesus, where the letters of Paul appear to have been gathered. It was assumed to have been intended for the Christians in Ephesus who lived in Paul's day; and so it was entitled "To the Ephesians." At a later date the phrase "in Ephesus" was inserted into the space left blank in the salutation.

Ephesians as a whole is organized along very simple lines. It divides itself into two major parts: the first three chapters are devoted to doctrine; the last three to ethical considerations. Such a sequence, considered all by itself, is of considerable significance. It is a vivid reminder that in Christian living the indicative of God's redemptive action always precedes the imperative of our response. The key principle in Christian ethics may be stated as follows: "Become what you already are." By God's action we are already saints; our job is to show that we are.

Such living is quite different from that of pursuing ideals. Our Scriptures know nothing about such striving; the word "ideals" does not even occur there. The virtue of reaching for the stars comes to us from ancient Athens, not from Jerusalem. As the apostle saw it, life is comprised of responding properly to what God has already done with men and for them. Accordingly, the first three chapters of our epistle deal with what God planned and did for the redemption of the universe. The second half of the document spells out some of the consequences of this action in terms of reaction to God's prior decision and doing. The chief subject of the epistle, "The Secret of God's Plan," is treated in

<sup>6</sup> Edgar J. Goodspeed, *The Meaning of Ephesians* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1933), passim.

<sup>7</sup> The arguments pro and con are given in detail by C. Leslie Mitton, *The Epistle to the Ephesians* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1951).



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a measured liturgical style equal to its sacramental dimensions for our existence.

We shall divide our study into four units. We want to discuss God's eternal purpose for the world according to its content, its implementation, its opposition, and its scope. An essay is devoted to each of these matters. In our analysis, we shall try to let the apostle speak for himself as much as we can. After all, it is the apostolic word that matters.

## THE CONTENT OF GOD'S PLAN

We shall begin our first study with a look at some of the terms used in Ephesians for God's plan. The most important of these is the word "mystery." It is clear from the epistle that we are to think of this as an open secret. Its content was once hidden but was then revealed in the apostolic age. According to Eph. 3:3-6, the heart of this "mystery" is God's intent to unite in one community the two separate segments of ancient society, namely, Jew and Gentile.

For many centuries the division between Jew and Gentile poisoned the human situation; and God's solution to this problem remained hidden. For that reason the apostle used the term "mystery," for which the Aramaic word is *raz*. In the book of Daniel dreams are described as "mysteries." Their significance was given in a subsequent revelation to and by Daniel himself.

This sequence of "mystery" and "revelation" was taken over into the Jewish community at Qumran, where it was thought that the texts of the ancient prophets constituted the "mystery." The revelation (*peshet*) consisted of the interpretation put on the text by the Teacher of Righteousness. St. Paul, by way of con-

trast, was persuaded that the revelation of God's mystery had been provided in the person and work of Jesus Christ. With His coming a community had been created that was to include Gentiles in the commonwealth of Israel, without the necessity of first accepting the practices of Judaism. That is how the mystery was revealed.

## THE FATHER'S BLUEPRINT

Another word for God's plan is that of "design" (*prothesis*). We might think of this as signifying a blueprint, the kind that an architect uses in the construction of a building. The very term suggests to us that we are in our Father's house and not in some ramshackle structure, characterized by an impersonal order. Since a design is being worked out in history, we are assured that a personal purpose is at work in history and in our lives and that the cosmos is not a huge machine secreting its own solutions as it moves along.

It would seem that this note needs to be struck loudly today. In our frenetic and chaotic age men tend to despair of any plan at all in life and history. To exhibit this kind of emptiness, we have a little song, often done to the accompaniment of a guitar, whose lines go as follows:

He's a real Nowhere Man,  
Sitting in his Nowhere land,  
Thinking all his Nowhere plans,  
For Nobody.

For a culture plagued by this kind of futility and lack of direction the apostle offers the concept of a blueprint being worked out in history. He does not hesitate to add the observation that the motivating power behind all this is God's "good pleasure."



Without benefit of revelation it would hardly be possible to recognize a pattern or a design in what goes on around us. Much less would we come to the conclusion that such a plan was drawn up by God's good pleasure. With the ancient Athenians or Babylonians or Egyptians or with modern secularists for that matter, we might well reason that "whirl is king." For men without God everything seems to be moving toward nothing in particular. In all this commotion men feel trapped by their gadgets. There is an emptiness and a lack of direction in existence that recently prompted one distinguished professor of history to exclaim that history "is just one fool thing after another." Now, lest men be left without hope, we have the Letter to the Ephesians, whose opening doxology is devoted to the lyrical praise of God's grand design.

Before we go on to the first major pericope, Eph. 1:3-14, we must stop just long enough to take a look at the salutation of this epistle. For, while Ephesians is a theological treatise, it comes to us in the form of an ancient letter. The pattern of ancient letter writing differed somewhat from ours. When we write letters, we sign our name at the end. We usually start by indicating the addressee. In the first century of our era it was the general practice for the writer of a letter to put down his own name first. Then he indicated to whom he was writing; and then he added a greeting. We might use the following formula to express such a pattern: A to B, greetings! That is also the structure of the salutation to Ephesians. To be sure, the apostle expands on each of the items in the formula; yet the basic pattern remains.

### THE SALUTATION

In this salutation the writer calls himself an "apostle." Paul, of course, had been Saul of Tarsus. He had been trained by Gamaliel in Jerusalem (Acts 22:3). He set out to become a rabbi, as many other young men of his age did. He had never dreamed of becoming an apostle; that is to say, an ambassador for Jesus Christ. As an apostle, therefore, he stood in discontinuity with all his previous ambitions and his prior training. He was an apostle because God had broken open the circle of existence to redirect his whole life.

In his earlier years Saul could not, even in his wildest dreams, have imagined that he would ever belong to a small and select group of persons whose activity and whose instruction would constitute the very foundation of a new people of God. But the risen Lord had cut across his path on the road to Damascus and had turned the prime persecutor of the church into its chief apostle. Paul ascribes this radical change to nothing less than the will of God. Here was God's plan at work, arranging to establish within history that community which is built on the word of prophet and apostle.

We are somewhat familiar with the term "apostle" from our theological training. Yet it may be useful to describe its full import. An English equivalent might well be our word "ambassador." An ambassador is a person who speaks, not on his own authority but at the direction and behest of someone else. Our ambassador in Saigon, for example, speaks for the President of the United States. In fact, in the language of our Foreign Service, he serves as the extension of the personality of the President of the United States. When



Paul thinks of himself and speaks of himself as an apostle, he wants his readers to know that he is not addressing them on the basis of his own personal insights. He wrote to the congregations he had in mind, and he speaks to us today as one who had and has behind him no less than the authority of the Lord of the church Himself.

It has been suggested that the role of the Christian apostle parallels somewhat the work of the *sheluchim* of the Jewish religious establishment.<sup>8</sup> These "messengers" of Judaism were sent from Jerusalem, by the chief authorities there, to the synagogues in the Roman Empire officially to announce the beginning of the new year and to indicate when the festivals would be celebrated. These persons represented the highest religious authority among the Jews. They went out with the word and authority of no less than the Jerusalem Sanhedrin.

The word "apostle" is obviously a Greek rendering of this Hebrew term. Yet there is more involved in being an apostle than being an official "messenger" of some religious body. A person could become an apostle only as he was called directly by the risen Lord Himself. Since the risen Christ had appeared to Saul on the road to Damascus, he could claim to be an apostle in the same sense that the Twelve were. Like them, he had the responsibility of serving as the plenipotentiary of the Lord Himself.

Obviously, he did not belong to the Twelve. He was fully aware of this, as we see from 1 Cor. 15:7. And yet he could

and did insist on his apostleship. He was number 13, so to speak. He was the one who broke out of the Jewish pattern of twelve associated, for example, with the patriarchs. Paul was the apostle to the Gentiles and so represented that moment in God's plan when Gentiles were brought into the commonwealth of Israel as fellow citizens.

Apostleship was limited, naturally, to one generation. To be an apostle meant to serve as a personal eyewitness to the risen Lord, who chose to appear to His chosen ones only for a brief time after Easter. Paul wrote in his capacity as a person to whom the Lord had appeared.

To the readers of his epistle he applied two adjectives. He spoke of them as "holy" and "faithful." To be holy means to be separated for service in the way Israel had been chosen from among the nations of the world as the people of God. The term is not intended primarily to describe ethical achievements. It is used, rather, to refer to God's liberation action. The Lord separates men for service to Himself; when that happens, men are made saints. God Himself is called holy, not so much because He is the absolute summation of all ethical accomplishment but because He is the Wholly Other, separated from us in the sense of being our Creator, Redeemer, and Sanctifier.

The second term may be translated as either "faithful" or "believing." Perhaps the apostle had both in mind. He was persuaded that he was writing to persons who had come to faith and had remained loyal to their Lord. At verse 15 in the first chapter the apostle wrote in a very complimentary way of the report that he had received of their faith and love.

<sup>8</sup> Karl Heinrich Rengstorff, *Bible Key Words*, II (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1958), iv, 16—17. (This is an English rendering of the article in Kittel's *TWNT*.)



After describing himself in his relationship to the people of God, and saluting them as both holy and faithful, Paul extends greetings. His greeting includes both grace and peace from God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

"Grace" is a New Testament term to connote God's undeserved favor toward us. The Old Testament does not use the word in this sense. The Old Testament word for greeting is "peace" (*shalom*). It stood for all the wonderful things pertaining to the Messianic age. These blessings the apostle wishes for his readers. Grace and peace point to God's action in creating a people of His own. The apostle was determined to assure his readers that God had acted to give them both His undeserved favor and the privilege of belonging to the Messianic age with all attendant blessings.

#### THE OVERTURE

After this brief discussion of the salutation, we must turn to what may well be called the overture to the epistle, namely, 1:3-14. In Greek it is just one long sentence. To make it readable, the statement has to be broken down into six sentences, as in the Revised Standard Version:

Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places, even as He chose us in Him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and blameless before Him. He destined us in love to be His sons through Jesus Christ, according to the purpose of His will, to the praise of His glorious grace which He freely bestowed on us in the Beloved. In Him we have redemption through His blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of His

grace which He lavished upon us. For He has made known to us in all wisdom and insight the mystery of His will, according to His purpose which He set forth in Christ as a plan for the fullness of time, to unite all things in Him, things in heaven and things on earth. In Him, according to the purpose of Him who accomplishes all things according to the counsel of His will, we who first hoped in Christ have been destined and appointed to live for the praise of His glory. In Him you also, who have heard the Word of truth, the Gospel of your salvation, and have believed in Him, were sealed with the promised Holy Spirit, which is the guarantee of our inheritance until we acquire possession of it, to the praise of His glory.

There are two other passages in the New Testament which resemble this doxology. One is found at the beginning of First Peter, and the other occurs at the outset of Second Corinthians. Despite the surface similarity among these three pericopes, neither of the other two is quite so dazzling as our present passage in the shifting colors of its terminology and structure. For here, in Ephesians, we are invited to look upon the procession of the universe as it moves toward its appointed goal of "being summed up in Christ." The expressions just tumble over each other as they issue in the universal adoration of "Him who works all things after the counsel of His own will." The long sentence never really stops to catch its breath.

Reading it is an overwhelming experience. As we go over it again and again, we discover certain key phrases, such as "the will of God" (5, 9, 11), "to the praise of His glory" (6, 12, 14), and "in Christ" (3, 4, 6, 7, 9, 10, 11, 12, 13). We notice at once that this overture is structured



around the Persons of the Trinity. Each of its sections closes with the phrase "to the praise of His glory." The Father is spoken of as the author of the eternal purpose (4-6); the Son is described as the agent and center of this grand design (7-12); and the Spirit is depicted as the "down payment" on our inheritance, the goal of all of God's work in liberating us (13-14).

From these general observations we now move on to the specifics of the passage before us. We shall take it up according to its parts, beginning with the opening statement: "Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us *in* every spiritual blessing *in* the heavenlies *in* Christ."

#### WORDS OF BENEDICTION

The opening phrase, "blessed be God," has taken on the form of Jewish devotional language. To this day when a Jew sits down to eat, he will start his prayer by saying: "Blessed art Thou, Jehovah our God, King of the world." As he says his Eighteen Benedictions each day, he comes again and again to the phrase "blessed art Thou." By way of example, let me just read the first two of these prayers:

1. Blessed art Thou, O Lord,  
The most high God, Maker of heaven and earth,  
Our shield and the shield of our fathers!  
Blessed art Thou, O Lord, the shield of Abraham.
2. Thou art mighty forever, Thou sustaineest the living  
And givest life to the dead.  
Blessed art Thou, O Lord, who makest the dead to live.<sup>9</sup>

<sup>9</sup> Given in full by F. C. Grant, *Ancient Judaism and the New Testament* (New York: Macmillan, 1959), pp. 45-46.

The writer of the letter to the Ephesians grew up in the kind of devotional life which would regularly recite just such prayers. The form, therefore, of the first words in our doxology came rather naturally to him. Yet in content they are radically new. Only as a Christian could Saul of Tarsus speak of "the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ."

Behind this kind of language, very obviously, is the earliest creed of the church. It read: "Jesus is Lord." That is what a man was expected to confess in apostolic days when he was received into membership with the church. At that point in his career the convert had to declare himself. He had to make a choice between "Caesar is lord" and "Jesus is Lord." In subsequent decades it became a dangerous choice to make, including as it did the requirement of burning a pinch of incense to Caesar as a religious act. On this point a host of Christians ran into serious difficulty. Many of them were martyred for their refusal to engage in this kind of recognition of Caesar and for declaring that "Jesus is Lord."

The apostle breaks out in praise to the God and Father of Jesus Christ for having blessed us, as he says, "*in* every spiritual blessing *in* the heavenlies *in* Christ." Three times we run into the Greek preposition *en*. "In Christ" describes the locale of God's action; "in the heavenlies" is a reference to the sphere; and "in every spiritual blessing" describes the scope and means of bestowal.

When we hear a blessing spoken at the close of a service, we are not always fully aware of the intent of this act as derived from the long story of God's dealings with His people. Biblically speaking, when a



blessing is pronounced, God is active transmitting life and destiny. When, for example, Isaac blessed Jacob rather than Esau — by mistake, to be sure! — Jacob and his descendants were designated to be the heirs of God's promises. These ancient words of blessing were a call for trust in the future. When rabbi or priest in Israel concluded a service with the Aaronic blessing, he spoke words of life over the assembly. It was an act by which he declared a particular group to be the people with whom rested the issues of God's redemption.

When the apostle speaks of God's actions in this way, he is saying that God has spoken over His people those words which in every respect have made the future certain and set it moving in the right direction. There is no kind of spiritual blessing, there are no words of life which He has not spoken in Christ to deal with the great contest going on in that sphere which Paul calls "the heavenlies."

Here is an expression peculiar to Ephesians. It belongs to the cosmological language of the apostle. We shall consider it in greater detail in a later study. For the moment it is enough to say that the term signifies the spheres of life and of the universe where a bitter conflict rages between the powers of darkness and the claims of God. The expression occurs here to suggest that the work of God in Christ has cosmic dimensions; for it embraces the whole region from earth to the highest heavens.

There God has spoken over us a word of benediction. In our culture we tend to separate word from act. Such a practice you will not find in Scripture. There God's act is His Word; and His Word is His

act. In verses 4, 5 and 6 we find Paul giving us a statement on that action which comprises the Father's every spiritual blessing.

These verses describe action with a long reach. The apostle emphasizes that God's selection of us as His sons was made before history began. Way back there, before the march of time began, God made a choice in Christ. His plan of redeeming men antedates creation itself.

In the Judaism which Saul of Tarsus absorbed in his youth, it was said that the world was made as the place where the Torah could be kept.<sup>10</sup> Something of that idea shines through here. Creation was undertaken in order to make possible the implementation of God's eternal purpose of redeeming mankind and the universe.

It is said that the Father acted in love as He predestined us. That is to say, in fixing His choice upon us He was not moved by anything that we might do or leave undone. *Agape* is the kind of love which is not motivated by anything lovable in the object of affection. On the contrary, as the apostle puts it in Romans, while we were enemies of God, most unlovable, God sent us His Son (Rom. 5:8). Such is the measure of His love. It is always prepared to be betrayed, as our Lord was. That kind of love prompted God to choose us in eternity.

#### OUR ADOPTION

He predestined us to what the apostle calls "the adoption of sons." Here is an expression which is used of ancient Israel's relationship as it was established at the time of the Exodus. In the days of Israel's

<sup>10</sup> See W. D. Davies, *Paul and Rabbinic Judaism*, 2d ed. (London: SPCK, 1955), p. 170.



Egyptian servitude, Moses was sent to Pharaoh with the instructions: "Thus says the Lord, Israel is My firstborn son, and I say to you, 'Let My son go that he may serve Me'" (Ex. 4:22-23). Paul is the only one in the New Testament who talks about adoption: once as a term to designate our final liberation from the vicissitudes of our present existence (Rom. 8:23); once of Israel's experience in being chosen as God's son (Rom. 9:4); and three times of our new status before God in Jesus Christ. The inner connection between the experience of Israel and of the church according to the apostle's thought is established by Baptism. As God's ancient people were set free at the waters of the Red Sea, so members of the new Israel are liberated from the futility and hopelessness of human existence by the waters of Baptism.

We might note that Jews ordinarily did not practice adoption; but in Paul's day it was a common custom among the Romans.<sup>11</sup> The ceremony itself generally consisted of two parts. There was, first of all, the symbolic sale of a boy to his new father (*mancipatio*); then there took place what was called the *vindicatio*, when the adopting father went to the proper official to present his case for adoption. Regardless of the details involved, four things happened when a person was adopted. The person so adopted, in the first instance, lost all his old rights and gained new ones. Second, he became an heir of his new father's estate. Third, his old life, with its debts and responsibilities, came to an end. Finally, a person so adopted literally be-

came the son of his new father. Octavian, for example, even though he was by birth a nephew of Julius Caesar, became his son and so his heir.

To this kind of radically new relationship God predestined us as sons. This, of course, is a way of saying that the fall of man from the perfection in which he was created did not catch God off guard. Our heavenly Father had already planned our liberation "before the world began to be." At that point in eternity He chose us to be holy and blameless before Him. He arranged for us to live openly as members of His family, with nothing to defile or to detract from our service to Him as His people.

The purpose of all this, we read, was that God receive praise for the glory of His grace. The first of three occurrences of this doxological phrase is given in verse 6. Praise is to be accorded the Father for the undeserved favor "bestowed on us in the Beloved."

The word "grace" is applied here to the manifestation of God's good pleasure in history, among men, after the foundation of the world. We were "graced" in the Beloved; that is to say, in our incarnate Lord.

#### CHRIST, THE TRUE ISRAEL

The apostle here applies to an individual, Jesus Christ, a term used in the Old Testament of the people of Israel. He intends thereby to underline what the New Testament suggests in many places, namely, that Jesus of Nazareth is the true Israel, who assumed the responsibility of obedience and service to which Israel of old had been called. Included in this sonship is the function of being the Suffering

<sup>11</sup> See Septimius Buss, *Roman Law and History in the New Testament* (London: Rivington's, 1901), pp. 271-82.



Servant of Yahweh. The history and experience of Israel as God's people and as His servant are summed up in the work of Jesus Christ. All the grace God bestowed on Israel finds its focus in *the* Beloved, in whom God chose us from eternity.

In the next part of our pericope Paul refers once again to this grace. There the relationship of Jesus Christ to the mystery of God's will is described in a passage brilliant enough to dazzle even the most casual reader. These verses are so compactly written that they are difficult to comprehend at first reading. We turn to it, therefore, for a discussion in some detail.

Five times — no less! — Paul uses the expression "in Christ," "in Him," "in whom," to be sure that no one would miss the point. The mystery of God's will was revealed in Christ, working at the very center of time, to make possible the summation of all things in God's Messiah. In fact, to that end Jesus was anointed, to accomplish unity where there is division, to make heirs out of rebels, to offer forgiveness where there is transgression.

The blood language of the New Testament at times troubles people. When this happens, it is sometimes due to a failure to grasp the full dimensions of evil. Man, as he is born, is in open revolt against his Creator. Man's normal desire is *not* to serve for the praise of God's glory. From such deep-seated disobedience there was really no way of setting people free except by blood — the sacrifice of one life for all of us! The apostle does not hesitate to say so. He has no interest in some face-saving formula for men; for there really is no face to save. "In Christ we have liberation," he

says, "through His blood." There are no ifs and buts about this.

Paul Tillich has spoken of sin as man's estrangement from the center of his being.<sup>12</sup> Now, possibly, when you are working at the frontier between theology and philosophy, as he always insisted he was doing, one must talk like this. But in the church such language is not strong enough. In Biblical theology sin is rebellion; it is man's unwillingness to let God be God. The refusal to come to faith is the great sin, as Luther so eloquently points out in his explanation of the Fifth Petition. How can such refusal be burned out of man's existence except by blood, the life of One who was totally obedient, expended for all the rest of us in our disobedience? The trouble is so deeply rooted that we need to be reminded of the fact that God does not call us to dialog but to obedience.

#### THE FULLNESS OF THE AGES

At any rate, the writer of Ephesians finds no difficulty in referring to the blood of Jesus Christ as the means of liberation. We now have forgiveness as a result of the abundance of grace showered upon us, because God is wise and understanding. He arranged history in such a way as to provide a moment called "the fullness of the ages." His eternal purpose planned a happening — the Christ-event — as a way of offering fullness and meaning for everything. If we want to take *plērōma* ("fullness") in its passive sense (the ques-

<sup>12</sup> Paul Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, II (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1957), 44—59. The sentence here specifically referred to is given on page 49 as follows: "In estrangement man is outside the divine center to which his own center essentially belongs."



tion has been much debated!),<sup>13</sup> then we see things move in the other direction. In that case all ages run toward the moment of fullness to fill it with abiding significance; and so it is filled.

Here is a way of saying that various ages in history have their own significance. Some moments are of greater importance than others. A point of time that has redemptive significance the Scriptures call a *kairos*. The Exodus was such an event; so were the Exile and the Return, the Crucifixion, and the Resurrection. All these *kairoi* are gathered up in the Christ-event, taking place at the center of time. After Easter life is no longer "a tale told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, signifying nothing." It has been taken up into God's grand design. Like everything else in the universe, it is being added up.

The verb which Paul uses for "summing up" includes both the thought of gathering and that of Christ being the Head of all things in heaven and on earth. Such movement toward oneness goes on in keeping with the blueprint of Him who "energizes" all things. The modern man of thought pictures the universe as a unified, developmental, and historical process, involving man who is intrinsically social in character. It is a universe open toward the future. Accordingly, whatever transcends reality is no longer thought of as a realm of timeless truth above us but rather as that which lies ahead of us in those new ages into which man finds himself hurled with ever-

increasing speed. On the basis of Ephesians we can say that this future is predictable in its bold outline. In it will take place the unfolding of the mystery of God's will, consisting of His intent to sum up all things under Christ.

#### THE SPIRIT'S GUARANTEE

It is the Holy Spirit's job to keep us mindful of this vision. For He has been given to us in "down payment of our inheritance," as St. Paul puts it in the concluding verses of the overture to Ephesians, verses 13 and 14.

Here is language about the future. It speaks of our inheritance. What we hope to inherit, we do not yet have in full. We are not yet in possession of our full redemption. Still, as St. Paul puts it, we have been sealed by the Holy Spirit. Such imagery reflects the Oriental custom of marking a person with the symbol of one's loyalty and affiliation. In old Cairo today we find Coptic Christians wearing the cross tattooed on their forearms as a reminder of this custom. As circumcision was known in Old Testament days to be the seal of the covenant, so the apostle's reference is probably to Baptism as the means of our authentication and appropriation.

Such action follows on hearing what the apostle refers to as "the Word of truth, the good news of salvation." When the last Israelite with his possessions got safely through the waters of the Red Sea, salvation had come to that people. This is, in part, the significance of the term "salvation." Fundamentally it refers to having room enough to move around in. It also contains the thought of healing, of living beyond the frustrations and irritations

<sup>13</sup> Concise statements on this matter are found in J. Armitage Robinson's great commentary, *Saint Paul's Epistle to the Ephesians*, 2d ed. (London: Macmillan, 1906), pp. 255 to 59, and in J. B. Lightfoot, *Saint Paul's Epistles to the Colossians and Philemon*, 9th ed. (New York: Macmillan, 1890), pp. 255—71.



which trouble us. The Word of truth is good news because it consists of the proclamation that such salvation is already a sure prospect since we have been sealed by the gift of God's Spirit in Baptism.

This brilliant overture ends on a note of praise and glory for the work of the Spirit. We have heard the words twice before, once in honor of the Father and again in praise of the Son. The apostle intended to respond with this refrain to each of the three persons in the Trinity for their respective parts in "the secret of God's plan."

Paul does so, however, with a view to the church, which is here called God's "very own," His precious possession. As in the case of the expression "those who first came to hope" (v. 12) the word *peripoiesis* reaches back all the way to the creation of Israel at Mount Sinai (Ex. 19:5-6). It is a way of speaking to remind us that the church stands in continuity with Israel of old. As God arranged for the liberation of His ancient people, so He

has given His Spirit as a down payment for our redemption.

The term employed by the apostle derives from the language of the Persians. When they spoke of an *arrabón*, they meant a partial investment in what was to be received in full later on. In that sense the Holy Spirit is already given us Christians by Baptism as a token of the age to come. It is His presence in and among us that keeps the future open toward the age to come, which is here called our inheritance.

#### A SUMMARY

If we were to summarize the overture to Ephesians (1:3-14), we might put it as follows: Here the apostle describes the secret of God's plan as the Three Persons of the Trinity relate to it in terms of origin, revelation, and accomplishment. To the Father, to the Son, and to the Holy Spirit is to be ascribed all the glory for this abundant grace in His Beloved.

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