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The Secret of God's Plan

Studies in Ephesians — Study Four

MARTIN H. SCHARLEMANN

This fourth and final study in the Letter to the Ephesians depicts the scope of God's secret plan for the universe. It follows the previous expositions of the content and implementation of the divine mystery as well as the opposition to God's purpose of restoring the universe by gathering up all things under the lordship of Christ.

The matter of scope is suggested by the apostle's use of *ta panta*, which means everything in its totality. The expression occurs in 1:10, where Phillips' version reads that "everything which exists in heaven and earth shall find its perfection and fulfillment in Him." *Ta panta* does not mean just a roster of all the items in the universe, the kind of itemized list which some cosmic or angelic supply officer might prepare for the Lord. It stands for the totality of all things in their structure, their organization, their relationships.

We sometimes sell ourselves short when we speak of salvation only in terms of the individual. Of course, we do not want to lose sight of the importance of each person — an importance which Protestantism has stressed in the life and thought of Christendom. But sometimes we have overdone it and have forgotten the fact that when God planned the redemption of the world He meant the world and all that is in it. There is a passage in Romans which somewhat parallels what is said here in Ephesians. It describes all of creation as stand-

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ing on tiptoe, eagerly awaiting the revelation of the sons of God. Paul goes on, in Romans, to say that creation is eager to be liberated from what he calls "the servitude of corruption." (Cf. Rom. 8:19-21)

The evidences of this slavery we have all about us. No harvest ever produces fully; there is always some apple that contains a worm. Now, creation is waiting for the time when it will no longer be cramped by being bound to man's rebellion against God. It expects to be set free in order to become what it was once created to be. That will take place when God finally liberates us from the trammels of our present existence. All of creation is bound together that closely. All of it groans together, as we do, waiting for what God has in mind.

Some Jewish apocalyptic literature talks of this age to come in what is surely rather exuberant language. It is found partly in a pseudepigraphic work, II Baruch 29:5, but, in an expanded form, spilled over into the writings of Papias, a disciple of Saint John. We give it here as the church father Irenaeus quotes it from Papias:

The days will come in which vines shall grow, each having 10,000 branches, and on each branch 10,000 twigs, and on each twig 10,000 clusters, and on each cluster 10,000 grapes, and each grape, when pressed, will yield twenty-five measures of wine. . . .¹

¹ Papias, fragment XIV, as translated in J. B. Lightfoot, ed., *Apostolic Fathers* (London: Macmillan & Co., 1912), pp. 522, 533.

This sounds exaggerated. Yet it is a vivid way of describing the extent of the change that will take place throughout the universe when all of creation is set free from the consequences of man's rebellion against God.

At Eph. 1:22 Paul refers to "all things" being summed up, or gathered up, under the lordship of Jesus Christ. The Greek word *anakephalaiōsasthai* implies the thought of summing up what is in a book or article. At the same time the term contains the word *kephalē*, meaning "head." The verb suggests gathering together all things in the *kosmos* under the headship, or lordship, of Jesus Christ. With that comes the healing of the primary division in the universe, namely, the cosmic rift that runs through everything.

Here we remind ourselves that the church is to be the precursor — an exhibit, so to speak — of the vast cosmic order which will be the final product of God's redemptive purpose. Maybe this should be emphasized more in our day. Much of what goes on in the church occurs in a hidden way. Like the ministry of our Lord Himself, the church's work is not impressive from an external point of view. To this day the kingdom comes not "with observation." Yet in His own mysterious way God is active among us and through us to bring salvation to the world. Let us not be deceived by the stumbling ways of the church. It has many faults and weaknesses. No one knows that better than we who are its members. Yet, in point of fact, what goes on in the church below the surface is nothing less than the central thrust of that redemption which God has planned for the world.

We have mentioned the cosmic rift.

Ephesians also speaks of a historic rift. We might call it the sacred rift, since it consists of the division between Jew and Gentile. The healing of that gap is described in Eph. 2:11-18:

Therefore remember that one time you Gentiles in the flesh, called the uncircumcision, which is made in the flesh by hands — remember that you were at that time separated from Christ, alienated from the commonwealth of Israel, and strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world. But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near in the blood of Christ. For He is our peace, who has made us both one and has broken down the dividing wall of hostility by abolishing in His flesh the law of commandments and ordinances, that He might create in Himself one new man in place of the two, so making peace, and might reconcile us both to God in one body through the cross, thereby bringing the hostility to an end. And He came and preached peace to you who were far off and peace to those who were near; for through Him we both have access in one Spirit to the Father.

No division in ancient society ran more deeply through mankind than that which had grown up between Jew and Gentile. The ancient Jew simply lumped all other races together under one term, *hagoyim* (in Greek, *ta ethnē*). It did not matter to him whether a man was an Egyptian or a Syrian; he was simply part of "the nations." The Israelite thought of himself as belonging to God's very own people, His elect *laos*.

In His grace God decided to eliminate this basic cleavage in society through the church. Bridging this gulf took a great deal of reflection and discussion on the part of the early Christians, as we know

from Acts 15 and Galatians 2. It was not easy to come to the conclusion that Gentiles could become part of God's people without first embracing Judaism. But just this was the mystery that had once been hidden from previous ages but was now made known to the apostles and prophets. (Cf. Eph. 3:6,9)

For Paul the mystery that had previously been hidden was God's plan to reconcile Jew and Gentile in Christ through the church. Now, if a person had belonged to Qumran in those days, he would also have heard something about divine mystery having been revealed. Yet that "mystery" was no more than the meaning of the Old Testament text for which the Teacher of Righteousness had provided the "revelation" by his special kind of interpretation.²

There is extant a commentary from Qumran on the Book of Habakkuk³ in which the ancient text of the prophet is called the *raz* (or *mystērion* in Greek). The *peshet*, the "revelation," was provided by the Teacher of Righteousness in his explanation of the text. At Qumran revelation was limited to explaining words for the benefit of a community that excluded all but the most faithful Jews. The radical difference in the Christian religion is that God's revelation took place in the person of Jesus Christ. Through His ministry and through His words God proposed to heal the long-standing rift between Jew and Gentile. Qumran had no real solution to this problem. Nothing in the work of the

Teacher of Righteousness suggests a method by which Gentiles might share in the hope of Israel. Qumran was a Jewish community, and there was no way in which a Gentile could conceivably become part of it, since he was not born a Jew.

The community at Qumran existed concurrently with the early church. It did not apply to itself the term church, *ekklēsia*, because that was a word which was known in the Gentile world. It preferred to call itself a group for "togetherness," an "assembly" (*edab*), insisting on its exclusiveness. Its members went out into the desert of Judaea to prepare for the coming of the Messianic age. Paul and his colleagues moved out into the world, to the very centers of Gentile life, to bring the Gospel there. The apostle was sure that it was the church's job to heal the rift which had developed between Jew and Gentile, since God's secret plan, now revealed, embraced the Gentiles.

All this Paul had in mind in chapter 3:10, where he described the angelic beings as seeing the multifarious wisdom of God at work in the church. The healing of this sacred rift was to be a demonstration within history of what God had in mind for the whole world. In the pericope under discussion (2:11-18) we have a somewhat detailed statement as to how God's redemptive and healing intent moved into history so that Gentiles might be incorporated into the commonwealth of Israel.

Here there is an insight that has affected a great deal of the modern church's approach to work with and among the Jews.⁴

² F. F. Bruce, *Biblical Exegesis in the Qumran Texts* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1959), pp. 8-12.

³ John M. Allegro, *The Dead Sea Scrolls* (Baltimore: Penguin Books, 1956), pp. 130 ff.

⁴ Göte Hedenquist, *The Church and the Jews* (London: Edinburgh House Press, 1961), p. 41.

It is based on the recognition that the Jew was the first to be chosen to belong to God's people. He was the vehicle of God's redemptive purpose in the ancient world. We as Gentiles have been grafted into that tree, to use the figure that Paul has in Rom. 11:17-20. Gentiles are made part of what God had already established in Israel of old.

The Gentiles are here spoken of as "people who were far away" (2:17). They were a long way from God's work in Israel. The Old Testament, therefore, refers to them as the people of the isles, scattered and distant. God intended that they be brought near. The Jews are here described as the people already near.

Now, how did Paul view the two sides of this rift? First of all, he realized that his own people, the *laos* to which he belonged, had been God's instrument of service and healing. The Gentiles lived outside of God's commonwealth. They lived, therefore, without hope because they did not know the God of promise.

"Being without real hope" is a phrase that describes most of the ancient cultures of ancient times outside of Israel. Even at that great moment when Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides presented their plays in Athens and when the Parthenon was built, there was not much hope in the life and thought of Greece. Toward the end of the *Oedipus Rex*, for example, the chorus comes to the conclusion that the best thing to have happened to a man is never to have been born, and the second best is to be born and to die right away.⁵ There was nothing the ancient Greek could

look forward to. The great things in history had happened in the past. Electra in Sophocles' play of that name had nothing to anticipate except exile from Argos.⁶

When Paul therefore described Gentiles as people living "without hope," he touched the very center of life apart from Israel. In Babylonian days, for example, scholars insisted that the cosmic clock came around upon itself every 3,600 years; and so history rolled back to where it had started. People were caught in a huge "squirrel cage," with much commotion, but without direction. We call this the cyclical view of history. This is still the prevailing notion of history in the Orient. When Christian missionaries go to India, for instance, one of the first things they have to do is to try to teach people a sense of direction in history. The Biblical revelation is not so meaningful as it might be unless one knows a God who gives promises in one age which are fulfilled at a later time. Trusting in that kind of God creates a linear view of history, which undergirds so much of the church's proclamation.

The ancient Gentile world did not know the God of promise who had revealed Himself to Israel in His mighty acts. The prophets of Israel made these people an exception to a general stance of hopelessness; for they talked about a God who was the Lord of history and who moved events forward toward a goal. We must keep this in mind as we read the works of these servants of God. They had learned to know that God who kept pulling history forward by fulfilling His promises. One such promise was this: a moment will come when

⁵ Sophocles, *Oedipus Rex*, trans. F. Storr (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1932), I, lines 1187 ff.

⁶ Sophocles, *Electra*, trans. F. Storr (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1932), II, lines 1162 ff.

the sacred rift between Gentiles and Jews is to be healed. That word was fulfilled in the incarnation and then by the crucifixion and resurrection of our Lord. Here is how the apostle handles this matter: "He has broken down the dividing wall of hostility," or "the middle wall of partition," as the King James Version has it.

"The middle wall of partition" (Eph. 2:14) may be an expression referring to the bronze plaques nailed to the wall on the outside of that court in the temple in Jerusalem to which only Jews were admitted. These brass plates carried the following warning: "No man of another race is to proceed within the partition and enclosing wall about the sanctuary; anyone arrested there will have himself to blame for the penalty of death which will be enforced as a consequence."⁷ Paul himself got into trouble once because people thought he had taken Trophimus, an Asian Greek (Acts 21:27-28), into that part of the temple which no Gentiles were permitted to enter.

In light of the context in chapter two, it is probable that we ought to think more of the fence put around the Law by what we call the "tradition of the elders."⁸ The rabbis were not about to have the Law defiled, so they kept Gentiles at a distance by various regulations. These traditions separated Jews from Gentiles. They set members of the Jewish race apart from their environment. Juvenal, the Roman poet, observed how the Jew was always different, always separate, always exclu-

⁷ See G. Adolf Deissmann, *Light from the Ancient East* (New York: Harper & Brothers, no date), pp. 80—81.

⁸ Ernest A. Trattner, *Pirqa Avoth, Principles of the Fathers: Understanding the Talmud* (New York: Thomas Nelson and Sons, 1955), p. 161.

sive.⁹ Julius Caesar felt that it was advisable to issue a decree exempting Jews from military service because they would not work on the Sabbath nor eat the normal rations provided for Roman troops.¹⁰ Their traditions raised a wall of hostility in the world.

This sacred rift had now been removed, says Ephesians, by Christ in His crucifixion. We have a right to ask: "Just how could a crucifixion eliminate this middle wall of partition?" To that query the apostle responds in substance as follows: Christ put Himself under the Law to show it up for what it really is. It was the people of the Law who crucified Him, the Lord of glory. That is what the Law produced — the determination to eliminate Him who revealed man's rebellion against God for what in fact it is.

The best of all ancient religions, Judaism, set out to destroy that Lord who came, as we read, to put himself under the Law. By so doing Jesus experienced the full wrath of God over sin. He stood where we were to stand and so absorbed the consequences of all men's transgression. That is how the fence which divided Gentile from Jew was removed. He demonstrated for all to see that religion of Law is incapable of healing any rifts and that, instead, it widens the gaps dividing men from each other. The Law clearly revealed that it could not provide a solution to the question of how to bridge these rifts. Israel had been separated from its own God by the very Law that had been given to it as a special revelation.

⁹ Juvenal, *Satires*, 14.96—106.

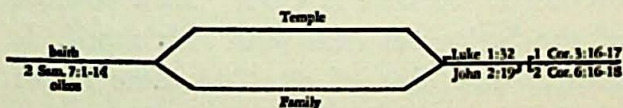
¹⁰ S. A. Cook, F. E. Adcock, and M. P. Charlesworth, *The Cambridge Ancient History*, IX (New York: Macmillan Co., 1932), 430.

The Gentiles, of course, had always been aliens. But now, in Christ, both the people of the Law and the people who had been afar off had been made one. Both had been given access to the same God in the same way, that is, through Christ. As Saint Paul puts it, Christ had accomplished reconciliation between both segments of mankind by the sacrifice of the cross.

This act showed that the sacred rift was totally unnecessary and irrelevant. Now there is good news, says St. Paul, namely, the Gospel of peace for those who are afar and for those who are near. The job of carrying forward this task of healing the sacred rift now belongs to the church. This is suggested by Eph. 2:19-22:

So then you are no longer strangers and sojourners, but you are fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God, built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus Himself being the Cornerstone, in whom the whole structure is joined together and grows into a holy temple in the Lord; in whom you also are built into it for a dwelling place of God in the Spirit.

Let us look at the language of these verses. The only way to get a full appreciation of the apostle's thought is to go back to a very crucial passage in the Old Testament, 2 Sam. 7:1-14.¹¹ The story



takes place at the moment when David, living in his palace, concluded that it was hardly proper for God's presence to remain

¹¹ See Martin H. Scharlemann, "Congregation: Place of God's Presence," *CONCORDIA THEOLOGICAL MONTHLY*, XXXV (November 1964), 615 ff. The above diagram may be useful.

in a tent. There ought to be a temple for God's residence, he felt. The prophet Nathan, however, came to David to say for God: "I have never asked for a temple. I have always lived in the tabernacle, because I am the God who moves with His people."

Unlike other ancient deities, who were bound to some cluster of trees or to some sanctuary, Yahweh proposed to be the God of His people. When they moved, His presence went along in what was called "the tent of meeting." Nathan observed: "God has never asked for a temple. You, David, ought not to worry about building God a house, a *baith* (Greek: *oikos*); He will make you an *oikos*, a house." This, of course, is a play on the word "house," which can mean either a temple or a household. The Samuel passage ends with the promise from God to David that his descendants would rule on his throne forever.

The first fulfillment of this promise took place, obviously, at the birth of Solomon as a scion in David's house. This son set out to build a temple, to erect God a house, a *baith*. But soon this very Solomon began to practice idolatry and fell out of favor with God. His descendants did not rule on David's throne for very long. In that sense God's *house* came to an end and lived on only in terms of a promise once given to David through Nathan. Once God has given a word, however, it lingers on and will not be broken. The hope lived on in Israel that someday there would come that great son of David who would fulfill this ancient promise.

The temple, however, lasted a while, but it was then destroyed. It was rebuilt in time and then expanded by Herod to

create that magnificent edifice in which Jesus Himself taught. One day, during that Herod's reign, the angel Gabriel came to Mary to say: "You are going to be the mother of David's great Son; and He will rule on His Father's throne forever" (Luke 1:32). That Son of David was born in due time and grew up to be a prophet in Israel. One day, standing in the temple, He said: "Destroy this temple, and I will rebuild it in three days" (John 2:19). He was not understood. John tells us that He was talking about the body of His resurrection.

The New Testament does not distinguish sharply, however, between the resurrected body of our Lord and the church. St. Paul picks up this thought in 1 Cor. 3:16-17. He describes the congregation in Corinth as the sanctuary of the living God. Paul was making the point that God dwells not only within individual Christians but among God's people. The greatest passage of all on this point is 2 Cor. 6:16-18, which reads as follows:

What agreement has the temple of God with idols? For we are the temple of the living God; as God said,
 "I will live in them and move among them,
 and I will be their God,
 and they shall be My people.
 Therefore come out from them,
 and be separate from them, says the Lord,
 and touch nothing unclean;
 then I will welcome you,
 and I will be a father to you,
 and you shall be My sons and daughters,
 says the Lord Almighty."

Verse 16 says that the congregation in the city of Corinth constitutes the sanctuary of the living God. The apostle proceeds to quote three passages from the Old

Testament, one right after the other; and it is interesting to observe which three verses he uses. First, he quotes from Leviticus those words in which God had said to Israel: "I will walk up and down in your midst; I will be your God, and you will be my children" (Lev. 26:11). Paul applies this remark to the Corinthians as the people of God's presence. The second quotation is from Is. 52:11, a reference to the returning exiles. The priests had been told to keep themselves clean and not to touch anything that defiles so that God might welcome His people back to Jerusalem. The third verse is the passage from 2 Sam. 1: "It has been written, I will be your God, and you shall be to Me for sons and daughters." That is what Nathan had told David in the name of the Lord, when he predicted that God would create a house for David. By revelation St. Paul knew that God's house, in both senses of the word, had been established in the founding of the Corinthian congregation, which was, at one and the same time, the household of David and the temple of the living God.

This means that, in the thinking of St. Paul and of the New Testament, the church is the answer to the question which has haunted mankind in its more mature moments: "Where is God?" In a way, all of the Scriptures deal with this motif. It records how, first of all, God came in his gracious presence to Abraham as a guest. He ate a meal with him before going on his way to consider the case of Sodom and Gomorrah. Some centuries later God chose to reside in the tabernacle, which in time was replaced by the temple. Even that building was not the final answer.

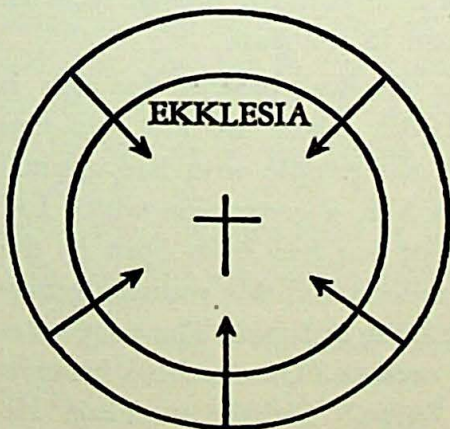
The abiding place of God's presence is

the Christian church. One short statement from Martin Luther makes this point rather succinctly. Said he: "Of course, God is present everywhere. He is to be found throughout the universe. He is in the water; but one does not drown himself to find Him. God is in the rope, but one does not hang himself to discover Him. He is present for us in the Word."¹²

It would seem to be a crucial point to make in reflecting on the relationship of the church to the world. Certainly God is present everywhere. In a sense, Christ is to be found among the nations of the world before any missionary gets there. After all, He has been entrusted with the ruling of the universe (1 Cor. 15:23-27). But He is present in grace only among His people, who gather around Word and Sacrament. That is St. Paul's point in 2 Cor. 6:16-18.

We must now look at what the apostle does here in the section from Ephesians presently under discussion. Eph. 2:21-22 says: "In Him each separate building, properly fitting together with others, grows together into a temple consecrated to God." Individuals are worked into this sanctuary where God Himself lives by His Spirit.

¹² WA 19, 442.



The word used for this edifice is *kat-oikētērion*, which is probably to be understood as meaning a "permanent residence." The verb occurs in the Old Testament with reference to the temple as the abiding place of the God, who hears from heaven.¹³ The Book of Revelation offers us the final chapter of all this. We are told that God Himself is the temple,¹⁴ as a feature of a new mode of existence. He is the God of His people. Where they gather to worship, as they do both in heaven and on earth, there He is present among them to make them His sanctuary.

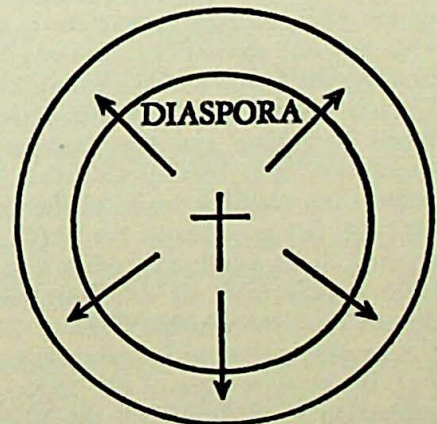
God is present in the church for the world. In ecumenical circles men tend to apply the two terms *ekklēsia* and *diaspora* to the double heartbeat of the church.¹⁵ The former represents the people of God assembling around Word and Sacrament, to use our Lutheran terminology;¹⁶ the latter is applied to the task of going out from our worship to serve in the world as

¹³ For example, at III Kings 8:13, 39, 43 (LXX) (I Kings in English Bibles).

¹⁴ Rev. 21:3.

¹⁵ Edmund Schlink, "The Holy Spirit and the Catholicity of the Church," *The Ecumenical Review*, XXI (April 1969), 98.

¹⁶ Article VII of the Augsburg Confession, *The Book of Concord*, ed. Theodore G. Tappert (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1959), p. 32.



God's instrument of healing both the cosmic and the sacred rifts.

Such an understanding of the church's responsibility is a far cry from a conception of the church as a fortress, daring people to get in. This view used to be expressed in some of the constitutions adopted by Lutheran congregations, which insisted that no one could become a member of a congregation unless various conditions were met.¹⁷ This reflected an exclusivistic spirit rather than an eagerness to serve out in the world as God's people.

We have discussed the healing of both the cosmic and the sacred chasms. There is a third — the rift that runs through each individual heart. Paul does not forget that side of the matter. He supplies an answer to the questions, "What about the individual's relationship to God's secret plan? How does the church relate to the task of solving man's problem with himself?"

First of all, the church provides a sense of continuity in an age which suffers from a crisis also in this area. The extent to

¹⁷ For example, a constitution and bylaws secured from the Concordia Historical Institute, St. Louis, Mo. 63105, includes one article that reads as follows: "Accordingly, no one can become a member, or enjoy the rights and privileges of a member of said Church, except he (a) is baptized; (b) accepts all the canonical books of the Old and New Testament as the only divine rule and standard of faith and life; (c) adheres to the Symbols of the Evangelical Lutheran Church and is acquainted with at least Luther's Small Catechism and the Unaltered Augsburg Confession; (d) leads a Christian life and abstains from manifest works of the flesh (Gal. 5: 19-21); (e) partakes of the Lord's Supper frequently, if an adult; (f) submits to the regulations already made by this body, provided they do not conflict with the Word of God, and suffers brotherly admonition when having offended; (g) is not a member of any secret or other organization conflicting with the Word of God."

which men are troubled by their discontinuities may be gauged from the size of the crowds that make it a point to visit museums. In fact, some of these buildings are so full of people in the summer that it is almost impossible to see anything worthwhile. We have a right to ask, "Why do people have this interest?" Very likely because, consciously or unconsciously, men are terrified by the atomizing forces at work in our culture. They are afraid to be alone. They would like to find something which will make them feel that they belong to some movement that has continuity. The church offers this in its most profound dimensions. Its story begins in eternity and sweeps through all of history toward an eternal destiny. Our God is the God of promise, and the story of revelation is the account of the way in which He has kept His promises down through the ages.

In the worship of God's people there takes place what today we call either "representation" or "actualization." This means that as we participate in a service, we remember God's mighty acts. We do this not only as a matter of recollection. Behind our remembering is the Old Testament concept *zakhar* (Greek: *anamimnēskēin*), which really means identifying oneself with, or incorporating oneself in, what God has done in the past.

The basic Biblical passage for this is Joshua 24:16-18, where we are told that Joshua took the people who had entered Canaan with him, a generation which had not left Egypt but had been born in the desert, and rededicated this younger generation to the Lord of Israel. The people responded by saying: "The Lord has brought us out of Egypt." Strictly speaking, He

had brought out their fathers, not this particular generation. Yet, in this act of worship the children identified themselves with their fathers' experience of being set free from Egypt.

From the days of our Lord Himself we have a Passover service which was done by Gamaliel II, the son of the one we read about in the New Testament.¹⁸ Four times in the course of this service the family celebrating the Passover identifies itself with the liberation from Egypt by speaking of or praying to God as the One who had set them free.

This kind of thinking is behind Jesus' instruction pertaining to the Lord's Supper, "This do in remembrance of Me." By taking part in this sacrament we incorporate ourselves, so to speak, into the sequence of God's redemptive acts. In Rom. 6:3-6 Paul applies all this to Baptism. By that sacrament we are incorporated into the crucifixion and resurrection of our Lord. We are taken back to the event. There is a line in an old Negro spiritual which asks: "Were you there when they crucified my Lord?" The response is strongly in the affirmative. The worshiper is there; and that provides a sense of continuity.

The church, moreover, offers a dimension in community. It creates the opportunity to live on the level of forgiveness and love. Our life in the church is one of response to that God who has liberated us for the task of serving others. Eph. 4:28 is radical on that point, for it cuts right across the usual practices of men, saying: "Let the thief no longer steal, but rather

let him labor, doing honest work with his hands, so that he may be able to give to those in need."

There is nothing here about saving money for a "rainy day." Instead thieves are asked to make an honest living so that they may have something to give to the person that is in need. That is "living sacrificially." On this point Eph. 5:2 says: "Live your lives in love, the same sort of love that Christ gives us and which He expressed perfectly when He gave Himself up for us in sacrifice to God." The church offers the chance for such living toward others. We might call this a life of thanks, as Eph. 5:4 reminds us: "Let there be no filthiness nor silly talk nor levity, which are not fitting, but instead let there be thanksgiving."

Verse 20 of this same chapter introduces us to one of the basic concepts of Christian ethics, namely, that of "subordination." We have referred to this previously. Now the time has come to linger over it a while. The Greek word is very hard to put into English. Literally it means ranking oneself under the needs of the next person. Imagine the sense of community that develops when you put yourself at the service of other people and their needs. What is it that divides? Is it not pride? Is it not our insistence on our own rights and concerns? The opposite of all such obsession with oneself is subordination.

In this context it may be useful to refer once more to the Dead Sea community, a religious community devoted to rigid spiritual discipline. All of this strict routine proposed to make it possible for one person, at the next annual inspection, to out-achieve his neighbor. If he succeeded, he could occupy a higher place at the

¹⁸ *The Passover Haggadah*, trans. Nahum N. Glatzer (New York: Schocken Books Inc., 1953).

table.¹⁹ Everything in the life of this religious community was geared to the desire of ranking oneself over the next person.

That is the way people normally live. Men try to outdo others, to outrank them, to achieve positions above theirs. In stark contrast to all this stands the subordination which Paul applies to all of our relationships: in the church, in the world, and specifically in marriage.²⁰

The most intimate of all human relationships, of course, is marriage. The apostle uses this to create an analogy between the church and Christ. As Christ is the Head of the church, so the husband stands in a place of authority over his wife. Because of such a fixed point of responsibility, marriage is classified as an order of creation or preservation.

As Christ loved the church, so the husband should love his wife; and as the church is subordinate to Christ, so the wife is to be subordinate to her husband. That is how unity is achieved. The pattern for this—and this is the point of what Paul is saying!—comes to us from outside the sphere of our existence. Marriage based on this kind of relationship is not the product of man's progress through the ages. The motivation for such a life is something that God had to introduce into

¹⁹ *The Dead Sea Scriptures*, ed. and trans. Theodor Herzl Gaster (Garden City, New York: Doubleday, 1956), p. 51 (1QS vi, 22—23).

²⁰ See Eph. 5:21-33.

history in the person of His Son. This is a way of saying that God Himself made manifest in history the kind of subordination that heals the rifts among men. A living reminder of this we have in the membership that is ours in the church. Belonging to this people means that we serve as unifying instruments among all the fragmentizing forces of society. The church, in fact, constitutes the only real exhibit of the kind of reconciliation that God has in mind for "all things."

Here you have Paul's vision splendid, as John Mackay puts it in his book on Ephesians, *God's Order*.²¹ Here is doctrine set to music. In our situation it is an appreciation of God's secret plan that will give bounce to our work as ministers of the Gospel. As we proclaim the Word and administer the sacraments, we stand in the very center of the ongoing reconciling activity of God. We have been called to live at the very heart of the mystery of His will, which is at work overcoming all that divides men from God and from each other. The groups that gather around us are the very people of God with which the Lord identifies Himself in His plan for the oneness of all things. The scope of God's secret is as broad as the universe itself. When its goal has been reached, then, in the words of Dryden, "music shall untune the skies."

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²¹ John Mackay, *God's Order* (New York: Macmillan Co., 1953), p. 17.