

# Overview of the Book of Ephesians

Understand as much as possible the original setting. The interpreter, if you will, must remove his or her twentieth-century bifocals, shedding the filter of twentieth-century mentality, and journey back into the first century. . . . In every case, a primary concern of interpretation is to try to hear what they would have heard. . . . One must try to live with the author and understand his mentality and his context. Above everything else the interpreter must try to understand what the author intended the recipients to hear.<sup>1</sup>

The Book of Ephesians extols the Gospel of Christ. This perception is generally not recognizable to many Christians because they do not pick up on the word *mystery* (μυστήριον, *mystērion*). Paul unfolds God’s grace in this short Epistle. He discloses that the “mystery” kept hidden from ages past is all about the revelation of God’s salvation made available to all who believe in His Son Jesus Christ. For us to really and truly appreciate the miracle of God’s blessings, we need to count the number of times that we encounter the prepositions “in” and “through.” The miracle of “rebirth” is even greater than raising the dead physically and making the physically blind to see. Just a casual reading of this amazing and wonderful epistle to the Christians in Ephesus should result in praise and adoration for God’s scheme of redemption for lost humanity. Do we stand in awe of God’s matchless love?

In this letter, Paul sets forth what it means to be a Christian in our daily walk with God. He also explores the concept of unity among God’s people as well as drawing attention to ethical behavior that should result from our conversion. A perusal of this short book reveals the tension between Jews and Gentiles. The overall theme in this book is hidden from many devout and sincere believers. In addition to this problem, Paul had to combat magical practices and allegiance to other gods, which was rooted in their background—a background of pagan religions. The city of Ephesus was known for its housing one of the Seven Wonders of the World—temple of the goddess Artemis/Diana. The citizens of this city, by-far-and-large were worshipers of Artemis. The Jewish population that met in synagogues would have been incensed at Paul’s remarks about the divine nature of Jesus. Another problem existed in advancing the notion that the Torah would be abolished, which included its Temple, animal sacrifices, and its feast days.

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<sup>1</sup>Gordon D. Fee, *Gospel and Spirit: Issues in New Testament Hermeneutics*, 1991), 7. **Gordon D. Fee** (1934–) is a leading expert in pneumatology and textual criticism of the New Testament. He is an ordained minister of the Assemblies of God and currently serves as professor emeritus of New Testament studies at Regent College in Vancouver, British Columbia.

In the introduction to this Epistle, Paul identifies the recipients as “to the saints in Ephesus” (τοῖς ἁγίοις τοῖς οὖσιν ἐν Ἐφέσῳ, *tois hagiois tois ousin en Ephesō*). The “saints” are the believers in Christ. In Christ, we are called saints/holy because we are now chosen by God and consecrated as His people. We have been set aside as the people of God to proclaim the Gospel (Ephesians 3:10). The question that confronts everyone is: Why have so many Christians failed to grasp the significance of this book? The answer lies, so it seems, in the practice of proof-texting in order to advance certain doctrinal beliefs based upon certain texts cited out of context. The source of many divisions today within the Christian community is created when individuals invariably isolate Scripture from its context and then absolutize these Scriptures to teach what its author(s) did not intend. Some Christians read the Holy Writings through the narrow lens inherited from their forefathers. As a result of arbitrarily choosing one text to arrive at a certain dogmatic position, Christians, as a whole, have failed to read the book as a book.

One classic example of piece-meal reading is the philosophy that it is sinful to praise God with instruments of music in the so-called worship service. The idea that it is wrong to employ instruments of music in the public gathering of the church is culturally conditioned upon traditions handed down from one generation to the next. This study seeks to avoid manipulation of biblical material in order to support the prior ecclesiastical interests of a select few. What we discover within certain circles within the Christian community is a “theology” of preachers and elders who wish to maintain their so-called distinctive roles as “defenders of the faith.” As a result of this mentality, we discover that language is distorted, evidence is ignored, and logic goes out the window. One of the most familiar Scriptures in the Book of Ephesians is chapter 5 and verse 19. In addition to this famous citation, two other Scriptures from this book also take their place alongside Ephesians 5:19. These two Scriptures are 4:5 and 5:11. The following is a chart of these three Scriptures:

Ephesians 5:19	Ephesians 4:4-6	Ephesians 5:11
Speak to one another with psalms, hymns and spiritual songs. <b><u>Sing and make music in your heart</u></b> to the Lord.	There is one body and one Spirit— just as you were called to one hope when you were called— <b><u>one Lord, one faith, one baptism;</u></b> <sup>6</sup> one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all.	Have nothing to do with the <b><u>fruitless deeds of darkness</u></b> , but rather expose them.

I cut my eyeteeth, so to speak, on these three Scriptures. As a young preacher, I never read the Book of Ephesians as a book, but rather, I read this book in order to maintain that instrumental music was sinful. I then cited Ephesians 4:5—“one faith”—to teach that anyone

who advanced the Scripturalness of Sunday school, individual communion cups, wine in the Lord's Supper, "breaking" the bread instead of "pinching" the bread, and so on are not a part of the "one faith" (**μία πίστις**, *mia pistis*). It just so happened that the "one faith" I preached was the doctrinal interpretation of God's Word as advanced by the "one-cup and non-Sunday school movement,"<sup>2</sup> not the Good News of salvation by grace through faith.<sup>3</sup> As a result of this mindset, I cited Ephesians 5:11 concerning the "unfruitful works of darkness" to give validity to my separation from other Christians who disagreed with my interpretation of the Bible.<sup>4</sup> These three Scriptures are still cited by many sincere believers in order to uphold their particular brand of orthodoxy. One objective of this essay is to liberate the Book of Ephesians from the nineteenth and twentieth century of ecclesiastical assumptions postulated by many sincere Christians. In the early years of my ministry (the first seventeen years), I was associated with a very sectarian fellowship, which still exists today. This fellowship of God's people still holds to their own historic position as handed down by its own unique fellowship from their preachers and teachers. Hopefully the following analysis will assist Christians in properly understanding the Book of Ephesians as a whole.

## READING THE BOOK OF EPHESIANS ACCURATELY

It goes almost without saying that "belief refers to a person's attitude toward a particular statement," but, on the other hand, "There is an important distinction between belief and truth. Truth is not relative, but belief is."<sup>5</sup> It is in this vein that Henry A. Virkler correctly points out: "**Beliefs do not change objective reality, although they do change a person's subjective reality.**"<sup>6</sup> Instead of decontextualizing Ephesians from its past, this essay seeks to recontextualize the Book of Ephesians in terms of Paul's own agenda. We should heed the words of Anthony C. Thiselton when he calls attention to the application that certain individuals make in their interpretation of the New Testament as being "no more than a manipulative mouthpiece for the interpreter's own conviction."<sup>7</sup> E. D. Hirsch, Jr.'s remarks are also on target:

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<sup>2</sup> This oddity (one-cup and non-Sunday school movement) is found in one of the twenty-five or more divisions found within the so-called Restoration Movement known as the Churches of Christ. I am not questioning the sincerity of God's people within this movement, but I am questioning their failure to read a book as a book rather than interpreting the Word of God in piece-meal fashion.

<sup>3</sup> For a detailed study of the subject of the "one Faith" "see Dallas Burdette, "One Faith" in *Old Tests through New Eyes: Reexamination of Misunderstood Scriptures* (Maitland, FL: Xulon Press, 2009), 339-382.

<sup>4</sup> For a detailed study of the subject of "works of darkness," see Dallas Burdette, "Unfruitful Works of Darkness," *Ibid.*, 333-338.

<sup>5</sup> Henry A. Virkler, *A Christian's Guide to Critical Thinking* (Nashville: Nelson, 1993), 90. See also Gordon D. Fee & Douglas Stuart, *How to Read the Bible for All Its Worth: a Guide to Understanding the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1982) for an excellent treatment of how to read in context. **Henry A. Virkler** (Ph.D., Georgia State University) is professor of psychology at Palm Beach Atlantic University. He has written five books, including *A Christian's Guide to Critical Thinking*.

<sup>6</sup> Virkler, *A Christian's Guide*, 90.

<sup>7</sup> See Anthony C. Thiselton, "New Testament Interpretation in Historical Perspective," in Joel B. Green, ed., *Hearing the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), 32. **Anthony C. Thiselton** is professor of Christian Theology at the University of Nottingham. He holds three doctorates (Ph.D., D.D., D.D) and has

Thus, when critics deliberately banished the original author, they themselves usurped his place, and this led unerringly to some of our present-day theoretical confusions. Where before there had been but one author, there now arose a multiplicity of them, each carrying as much authority as the next. To banish the original author as the determiner of meaning was to reject the only compelling normative principle that could lend validity to an interpretation.<sup>8</sup>

In the earlier years of my ministry as a boy preacher, I thought that my teachers were infallible interpreters. I could not distinguish between their interpretation and the Word of God itself. The following comments by Roy B. Zuck should alert every Christian to examine the Word of God itself to see if our respected preachers are on target: “No interpreter is infallible. Therefore he should acknowledge the possibility that his interpretation of a given passage may not be correct.”<sup>9</sup> In my sixty-seven years of ministry, I have discovered that there is a tendency among sincere Christians to allow their traditions to have the final word, not the Scriptures. Gordon D. Fee calls attention to one of the first principles of interpreting the Scriptures: “The first task of the interpreter is to discover what the text meant when it was originally written.”<sup>10</sup> As we read the Book of Ephesians, it is my prayer that we will understand, as much as possible, the original audience and the original setting behind this book. This new or corrected mindset should prepare us to read the book with new eyes, which reading should create within us a spirit of joy for what God has accomplished in our salvation.

As we approach the Book of Ephesians, we should stand in awe at the spiritual blessings that we experience “in” and “through” Jesus Christ. This book takes us back, as it were, into eternity past—“before the creation of the world” (Ephesians 1:9). Yes, Paul begins this book with the development of the “mystery” of God before the creation of the world (1:3-14) and ends this book with a request for the stamina of courage to make known the “mystery” (**μυστήριον**, *mystērion*) of God, which is the Gospel of Christ (**μυστήριον τοῦ εὐαγγελίου**, *mystērion tou euangeliou*, “mystery of the Gospel,” 6:19). In the first three chapters, Paul expands this mystery, and in the last three chapters, he sets forth the implications of this mystery of God’s will in the lives of God’s people.

The central thrust of the Epistle appears to be the development of the “mystery” of God. Following Paul’s presentation of this “mystery” in the first three chapters, he sets forth the implications of this mystery in the daily lives of God’s people. The word *mystery* appears seven times in this short epistle (**1:9; 3:3, 4, 6, 9; 5:32; 6:19**). If we neglect to grasp the full import of this mystery in the Book of Ephesians, then we fail to appreciate the thrust of Paul’s arguments throughout the Epistle for unity among the people of God and holiness as our way of life—twenty-four hours a day, not just one day a week on Sundays. If we do not care to state the overall subject of this Epistle in our interpretation, we will not get the full picture of the Book

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published important works on 1 Corinthians, hermeneutics, and has done research on modern theology, philosophy of religion, and the application of philosophy of language to biblical studies.

<sup>8</sup> E. D. Hirsch, Jr., *Validity in Interpretation* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1967), 5.

<sup>9</sup> Roy B. Zuck, *Basic Bible Interpretation: A Practical Guide to discovering Biblical Truth* (USA: Victor Books, 1991), 23.

<sup>10</sup> Gordon D. Fee, *Gospel and spirit: Issues in New Testament Hermeneutics* (Peabody, Massachusetts: Hendrickson Publisher, Inc., 1991), 20.

of Ephesians. This book has one central theme—the unfolding of God’s mystery, “which for ages past was kept hidden in God, who created all things” (3:9). Paul employs restatement about the “mystery” of God in order to draw attention to the essential focus of this Epistle.

**If we wrench citations from this book without cognition of its overall theme, we will ultimately utilize certain verses as launching pads for our own opinions or to uphold our own traditions.** For example, some Christians cite 1:3-14 in order to give credence to their erroneous views concerning predestination (Calvinistic theology)—some predestined to go to Hell<sup>11</sup> or Heaven without regard to faith in Jesus. Still, **there are other Christians who cite 4:5 (“one faith”) to advance the notion that Paul is setting forth their particular brand of orthodoxy.** Yet, there is another group of believers who cite 5:19 as justification for rejection of instrumental music in corporate worship. If we neglect to read the Book of Ephesians as a whole, we can easily bend the Scriptures to conform to our own thoughts. In other words, what we hear is not the voice of God, but rather our own voice. Haddon W. Robinson is therefore right when he says,

Having selected the passage, however, an expositor must allow it to speak for itself. Too often a passage will not say what we expected it to say. Topical exposition faces the special danger that the preacher will read something into the scriptural account in order to read something significant out of it. He may resort to “proof texts” for favorite doctrines by ignoring completely the context in which a passage lies. He may be tempted to transform a biblical author into a modern psychologist by insisting that he say in a sermon what he never said in the Bible. Topical exposition differs from the so-called topical sermon, therefore, in that the thought of the Scripture must shape all that is said in defining and developing the topic.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> I highly recommend the following essays on the subject of “hell” for a more accurate interpretation of this frequently misunderstood subject as postulated by the Christian community, as a whole, which traditional teaching, in my judgment, is unbiblical. See Samuel G. Dawson, *Essays on Eschatology: An Introductory Overview of the Study of Last Things* (Amarillo, Texas: SGD Press, 2009), 209-309. Also see, Samuel G. Dawson, *Restoration Cut Short: The Roman Catholic Eschatology of the Churches of Christ* (Bowie, Texas: SGD Press, 2018). This short book explores the history behind the modern-day philosophy of a torture chamber in which sinners will be “roasted” forever and ever, which teaching has its roots in Roman Catholicism. See also, Dallas Burdette, *Commentary on the book of Revelation: An Unraveling of the Olivet Discourse as a Preface to Understanding Revelation*, Volume 1 (Maitland, FL: Xulon Press, 2013), 363-410. These pages cover the “Second Death” and “The Rich man and Lazarus.”

<sup>12</sup> Haddon W. Robinson, *Biblical Preaching: The Development and Delivery of Expository Messages* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2000), 57. **Haddon W. Robinson**, Ph.D., is the Harold John Ockenga Distinguished Professor of Preaching at Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary in South Hamilton, Massachusetts. His book, *Biblical Preaching*, has sold more than 200,000 copies and has been used extensively in Bible colleges and seminaries since 1980.

# THE MYSTERY OF GOD

## Mystery Briefly Explained

### Ephesians 1:3-14

Paul breaks out into ecstatic praise as he reflects upon the spiritual blessings in Christ: **“Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in the heavenly realms with every spiritual blessing in Christ”** (Ephesians 1:3). The spiritual blessings are not outside of Christ, but rather “in Christ.” Again, we observe Paul’s words as he reflects upon the ones chosen before the creation of the world: “For he chose us in him before the creation of the world to be holy and blameless in his sight” (1:4). The ones chosen are those who are “in him.” Paul develops this concept by saying: “In love <sup>5</sup>he predestined us to be adopted as his sons through Jesus Christ” (1:5). Once more Paul stresses the place where all of this activity takes place: “In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of sins, in accordance with the riches of God’s grace <sup>8</sup> that he lavished on us with all wisdom and understanding” (1:7-8).

In verses 3-8, Paul spells out the real meaning of the “mystery” in the Book of Ephesians. The choosing, the adoption, and the redemption are events that transpire “in” and “through” Him, the savior of humanity. The mystery of God is about His rich grace lavished on sinful beings “in the One he loves” (1:6). Paul established the details of this revelation of God’s mystery as having reference to Christ:

And he made known to us the mystery of his will according to his good pleasure, which he purposed in Christ, <sup>10</sup> to be put into effect when the times will have reached their fulfillment—to bring all things in heaven and on earth together under one head, even Christ. (1:9-10)

The above verses (1:3-10) detail the nature of the Gospel, which is described in this book as the “mystery of his will” (1:9). Now, Paul brings together two terms—chosen and predestined—mentioned earlier (1:4-5) in order to demonstrate where all of this takes place: “In him we were also chosen, having been predestined according to the plan of him who works out everything in conformity with the purpose of his will” (1:11). The choosing and the predestination takes place in Jesus Christ, which is the mystery kept hidden in God from ages past. The question that confronts us is: How do we become a part of the chosen and predestined? Paul explains in very clear and unmistakable terms:

And you also were included in Christ when you heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation. Having believed, you were marked in him with a seal, the promised Holy Spirit, <sup>14</sup> who is a deposit guaranteeing our inheritance until the redemption of those who are God’s possession—to the praise of his glory (1:13-14).

When were the Ephesians included “in Christ”? Paul says, “when you heard the word of truth.” What is the “word of truth”? Paul defines this “word of truth” as “the gospel of your

salvation” (τὸ εὐαγγέλιον τῆς σωτηρίας ὑμῶν, *to euangelion tēs sōtērias hymōn*). This “word of truth” or the “gospel of your salvation” is equivalent to the “mystery of his will” in 1:9. Paul does not stop with the phrase, “**when you heard the word of truth,**” but he continues by saying, “**Having believed,** you were marked **in him** with a seal, the promised Holy Spirit.” In order for us to become a part of the chosen or predestined, we must “hear the word of truth” and believe the message of salvation, namely, the mystery of God, which is Christ. In the Colossian letter, Paul writes about this mystery also:

I want you to know how much I am struggling for you and for those at Laodicea, and for all who have not met me personally. <sup>2</sup> My purpose is that they may be encouraged in heart and united in love, so that they may have the full riches of complete understanding, in order that they may know the mystery of God, namely, Christ, <sup>3</sup> in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge. (Colossians 2:1-3)

In Colossians 2:2, Paul clearly identifies this mystery as “Christ.” Earlier, in this same epistle, Paul sets forth this mystery in glowing terms:

I have become its servant by the commission God gave me to present to you the word of God in its fullness—<sup>26</sup> the mystery that has been kept hidden for ages and generations, but is now disclosed to the saints. <sup>27</sup> To them God has chosen to make known among the Gentiles the glorious riches of this mystery, which is Christ in you, the hope of glory. (1:25-27)

Paul, in both Ephesians and Colossians, seeks to develop an appreciation of this “mystery of God” in order to bring about praise to the One who, from eternity past, decreed how men and women could stand justified in His sight. This mystery involved the reconciling of the whole of humanity unto Himself “in” and “through,” Jesus. He wanted all believers “to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ” (Ephesians 3:18) in leaving glory to become man in order to redeem sinful humanity (see also Philippians 2:1-11).

Paul prayed that God would give the Ephesians and Colossians a clear understanding of the magnitude of what God had actually brought about through Christ (Ephesians 1:17 and Colossians 2:1-2). If we can grasp the significance of this mystery, then our lifestyle will exhibit holiness on a daily basis. Prior to the unfolding of this mystery through His apostles, the prophets, too, had searched diligently concerning the time frame of this unfolding of the mystery that had been kept hidden in God from ages past (1 Peter 1:10-13; Colossians 2:1-2). Following Paul’s one sentence (Ephesians 1:3-14—Greek text), he breaks out once more into ecstasy as he seeks to call attention to the greatness of what God accomplished for mankind in and through Jesus Christ. Listen to Paul as he seeks to capture the wonder of it all:

I keep asking that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the glorious Father, may give you the Spirit of wisdom and revelation, so that you may know him better. <sup>18</sup> I pray also that the eyes of your heart may be enlightened in order that you may know the hope to which he has called you, the riches of his glorious inheritance in the saints, <sup>19</sup> and his incomparably great power for us who believe. That power is like the working of his mighty strength, <sup>20</sup> which he exerted in Christ when he raised him from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly realms, <sup>21</sup> far above all rule and authority, power and dominion, and every title that can be given, not only in the present age but also in the one to

come. <sup>22</sup> And God placed all things under his feet and appointed him to be head over everything for the church, <sup>23</sup> which is his body, the fullness of him who fills everything in every way. (1:17-23)

Paul wanted God to enlighten their hearts in order that they might come to appreciate something of the richness of what God accomplished in Christ. He wanted them to comprehend this “mystery of his will.” In Chapter 2, he works out in detail the consequences of their belief in Jesus as God’s Anointed One for the redemption of the human race. Before leaving this pericope—Spiritual Blessings in Christ—it is significant that Paul sets forth the ethical implications resulting from one’s being in Christ: “He chose us in him before the creation of the world to be holy and blameless in his sight” (1:4). In chapters 4-6, he works out the moral aspects of one’s life that result from a change in venue, namely, Christ. The next occurrence of the word *mystery* emerges in 3:3.

## Mystery Developed in Detail

### Ephesians 3:3, 4, 6, 9

The next four occurrences of this word *mystery* are found in the third chapter. An analysis of the word *mystery* in each of these four verses reveals the nature of this mystery. This mystery is about “the administration of God’s grace” (3:2). Paul, as it were, employs various phrases to capture the word *mystery*—“the word of truth,” “the gospel of your salvation,” and “the administration of God’s grace.” Prior to this last phrase—“the administration of God’s grace”—Paul explains the benefits that result from our union with Christ, which is what the mystery is all about (2:11-22). Thus, Paul begins the third chapter with the words: “For this reason” (3:1). Then in verses 3—9, he develops the very heart of this “mystery.” He wanted God to allow the Ephesians to recognize the full import of what He had achieved in and through Jesus Christ. The following verses expound the substance of this mystery:

Surely you have heard about the administration of God’s grace that was given to me for you, <sup>3</sup> that is, the mystery made known to me by revelation, as I have already written briefly. <sup>4</sup> In reading this, then, you will be able to understand my insight into the mystery of Christ, <sup>5</sup> which was not made known to men in other generations as it has now been revealed by the Spirit to God’s holy apostles and prophets. <sup>6</sup> This mystery is that through the gospel [διὰ τοῦ εὐαγγελίου, *dia tou euangeliou*] the Gentiles are heirs together with Israel, members together of one body, and sharers together in the promise in Christ Jesus. <sup>7</sup> I became a servant of this gospel by the gift of God’s grace given me through the working of his power. <sup>8</sup> Although I am less than the least of all God’s people, this grace was given me: to preach to the Gentiles the unsearchable riches of Christ, <sup>9</sup> and to make plain to everyone the administration of this mystery, which for ages past was kept hidden in God, who created all things. <sup>10</sup> His intent was that now, through the church [διὰ τῆς ἐκκλησίας, *dia tēs ekklēσίας*], the manifold wisdom of God should be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly realms, <sup>11</sup> according to his eternal purpose which he accomplished in Christ Jesus our Lord. <sup>12</sup> In him and through faith in him we may approach God with freedom and confidence. <sup>13</sup> I ask you, therefore, not to be discouraged because of my sufferings for you, which are your glory. (3:2-13)

In verse 2, Paul calls this mystery the “administration of God’s grace,” but in verse 9, he calls it “the administration of this mystery.” Then in verse 3, he identifies this “administration of God’s grace” as “the mystery made known to me by revelation.” Also in verse three, he says, “As I have already written briefly.” Where had Paul “written briefly” about this mystery? Just a casual glance at 1:3-14 and 1:17-23 reveals the “administration of God’s grace” as equivalent to “the administration of this mystery.” In 3:3, he repeats what he desired in 1:18, namely, the comprehension of insight into the vastness of this marvelous feat of redemption for both Jew and Gentile in and through Jesus Christ (2:14; 3:6).

Paul goes right to the heart of this mystery when he writes: “This mystery is that through the gospel the Gentiles are heirs together with Israel, members together of one body, and sharers together in the promise in Christ Jesus” (3:6). The phrase “one body” is significant. In Chapter 2, Paul speaks of “one new man” (2:15), “one body” (2:16), and “one spirit” (2:18). In Chapter 4, Paul calls for unity because there is just “one body” and “one Spirit” (4:1-6). The prophets had prophesied this mystery, but the prophets did not understand when the coming of Christ would take place. Peter describes this mystery as “this salvation” as well as “the grace that was to come.” Peter, too, develops the unfolding of this mystery that had been kept hidden, even from the prophets:

Concerning this salvation, the prophets, who spoke of the grace that was to come to you, searched intently and with the greatest care, <sup>11</sup> trying to find out the time and circumstances to which the Spirit of Christ in them was pointing when he predicted the sufferings of Christ and the glories that would follow. <sup>12</sup> It was revealed to them that they were not serving themselves but you, when they spoke of the things that have now been told you by those who have preached the gospel to you by the Holy Spirit sent from heaven. Even angels long to look into these things. (1 Peter 1:10-12)

**The prophets tried to find out when all this would take place. This mystery was hidden even from the angels.** They, too, desired to stoop low and look into this marvelous grace, which was hidden in God. In Ephesians 3, Paul informs the Ephesians that “His intent was that now, through the church, the manifold wisdom of God should be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly realms, according to his eternal purpose which he accomplished in Christ Jesus our Lord” (Ephesians 3:10-11). In other words, the church is a university, so to speak, for the angelic host. It is through the church that the angels learn about this salvation by grace through faith in His Son Jesus. If one preaches the mystery of God’s will, then one preaches the Gospel, namely, Jesus.

In 3:6-13, Paul elaborates on the mystery as the unfolding of God’s grace to the Gentiles. God extended grace to Paul in order that he might “preach to the Gentiles the unsearchable riches of Christ, and to make plain to everyone the administration of this mystery, which for ages past was kept hidden in God, who created all things” (3:8-9). **When we discuss the “unsearchable riches of Christ,” we are discussing the “administration of this mystery.”** When we preach the Gospel, we are divulging the means whereby God reconciles the world unto Himself. Paul forcefully concludes with his a summation of this mystery that he wrote about briefly in the first chapter: “In him and through faith in him we may approach God with freedom and confidence” (3:12). Jesus is the object of one’s faith. Since Jesus is the object of this “one faith,” then Paul speaks of “one Lord” and “one faith” (4:5).

## The Outcome of This Mystery

### Ephesians 2:11-22

The first three chapters of Ephesians describe in detail the “mystery of His will” (1:9). The objective of this essay thus far has been to zero in on the word *mystery*. Just a perusal of this epistle reveals that Paul seeks to develop their understanding of what this “mystery” is all about—namely, the reconciling of both Jew and Gentile to God “in” and “through” Jesus Christ. In Chapter 1, Paul employs the word *mystery* one time, but, in Chapter 3, he employs the word *mystery* four times. Beginning with 1:3 through 2:22, Paul endeavors to explain what this “mystery” is all about. A detailed explanation of this mystery is found in 2:11-22. In this pericope (unit or section)—One in Christ—he explains that both Jew and Gentile are reconciled unto God in “one body” (2:16).

In this section (2:11-22), he calls attention to the Gentiles by saying: “But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far away have been brought near through the blood of Christ” (2:13). Again, one observes that Paul stresses “in Christ Jesus.” Paul then deals with the question of Jew and Gentile in their relationship to each other. He says that Jesus is “our peace,” and it is Jesus who has created in Himself “one new man out of the two” (2:15-16). Thus, Jesus has reconciled both—Jew and Gentile—unto God in “one body.” Paul, in this pericope, brings in the Holy Spirit by saying: “For through him we both have access to the Father by one Spirit” (2:16). We can hardly read this unit of Scripture (2:11-22) without a consciousness of the expressions of “one body” and “one Spirit.” Again, in Chapter 3, Paul explains this mystery as the reconciling of both Jew and Gentile into “one body” (3:6).

### Unity in the Body of Christ

#### Ephesians 4:1-4

Is it any wonder that Paul speaks of the seven ones in Ephesians 4:1-4. In this pericope—Unity in the Body of Christ—Paul says that there is “one body” and “one Spirit.” Since this is so, then one should endeavor to maintain the unity created by the “one Spirit” (4:3). Paul writes:

Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace. <sup>4</sup> There is one body and one Spirit— just as you were called to one hope when you were called— <sup>5</sup> one Lord, one faith, one baptism; <sup>6</sup> one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all. (4:3-6)

The phrase “one faith” is frequently associated with one particular brand of orthodoxy. For example, over twenty-five divisions within the Churches of Christ cite this Scripture in order to uphold its particular beliefs concerning “pattern theology.” In other words, the “one faith” represents the belief system that God has ordained a worship service with five ritualistic acts that have to be performed in a prescribed manner. For many Christians, the “one faith” is not faith in Jesus, but rather their unique interpretation of certain Scriptures.

Just a cursory glance of this Epistle by Paul reveals that Jesus is the object of this “one faith,” not some odd interpretation placed upon some Scripture. This whole epistle is about “faith” in the “one Lord.” For example, Paul, having developed this mystery—Christ—(1:3-14), writes: “For this reason, ever since I heard about your faith in the Lord Jesus and your love for all the saints, <sup>16</sup> I have not stopped giving thanks for you, remembering you in my prayers” (1:15-16). Again, Paul calls attention to faith in chapter three: “In him and through faith in him we may approach God with freedom and confidence (3:12). Earlier, Paul writes:

And you also were included in Christ when you heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation. Having believed, you were marked in him with a seal, the promised Holy Spirit, <sup>14</sup> who is a deposit guaranteeing our inheritance until the redemption of those who are God’s possession—to the praise of his glory. (1:13-14)

The “word of truth,” “gospel of your salvation,” “mystery of God’s will,” and “Christ” are synonymous terms. What had they believed? They believed that Christ is the one and only way to God. This is why Paul immediately broke out in praise with the words: “ever since I heard about your faith in the Lord Jesus” (1:15). Then Paul explains that it is in Christ that one is made alive (2:1-10). In this pericope, he writes:

For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—<sup>9</sup> not by works, so that no one can boast. <sup>10</sup> For we are God’s workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do. (2:8-10)

Jesus is the object of our faith. We are saved “through faith” in Him (3:12). No wonder Paul concludes his explanation of the “mystery” with the words, “one Lord, one faith” (4:5). Once more, in Chapter 3, Paul writes: “so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith” (3:17). Following Paul’s use of the expression “one faith” in 4:5, he discusses how God

gave some to be apostles, some to be prophets, some to be evangelists, and some to be pastors and teachers, <sup>12</sup> to prepare God’s people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up <sup>13</sup> until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ. (4:11-13)

“Unity in the faith” concerns a proper understanding of “the knowledge of the Son of God” in God’s scheme of redemption. Jesus is the object of the “one faith.” Paul wanted God to open their eyes to understand the full meaning of what He accomplished “in” and “through” Jesus Christ. Listen to Paul once more as he explains his prayer concerning “unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God”:

I pray that out of his glorious riches he may strengthen you with power through his Spirit in your inner being, <sup>17</sup> so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith. And I pray that you, being rooted and established in love, <sup>18</sup> may have power, together with all the saints, to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ, <sup>19</sup> and to know this love that surpasses knowledge—that you may be filled to the measure of all the fullness of God. (3:16-19)

# Living As Children of Light

## Ephesians 4:17-5:19

Paul begins the fourth chapter of Ephesians with a call to “live a life worthy of the calling you have received” (4:1). The acceptance of Christ into one’s life demands a change in one’s external behavior. Beginning with 4:17, Paul encourages those who have placed their faith in Jesus as Lord to live upright and godly lives. As we approach Chapter 5 and verse 19, we quickly discover from the context that Paul is concerned about behavior that will honor God. Unfortunately, too many Christians have lifted 5:19 out of context in order to uphold their objection to instrumental music during the so-called worship service. We cannot limit 5:19 just to a church service. If so, then we would have to limit verse 18 to a church service also. Is Paul saying that we should “not get drunk on wine” while we are in a church service? Or is he saying that we ought never to get drunk with wine—in or out of the assembly.

Just a casual glance of Chapter 5 reveals that Paul is concerned about external behavior in one’s daily walk with God. For instance, Paul goes right to the heart of ethical conduct when he writes: “For you were once darkness, but now you are light in the Lord. Live as children of light<sup>9</sup> (for the fruit of the light consists in all goodness, righteousness and truth)<sup>10</sup> and find out what pleases the Lord” (5:8). Again, he writes in this same chapter: “Be very careful, then, how you live—not as unwise but as wise,<sup>16</sup> making the most of every opportunity, because the days are evil” (5:15-16). The Ephesians were “to live a life of love” (5:2). He wanted them to “understand what the Lord’s will is” (5:17).

The will of God is that His people refuse to walk in the ways of the world. For this reason, he exhorts the believers: “Do not get drunk on wine, which leads to debauchery” (5:18a). This exhortation is not limiting this kind of behavior only to a so-called church service. Rather, he wants them to “be filled with the Spirit” (5:18b). Instead of singing lewd songs and making lewd music as the heathen do, one should sing psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs with gratitude in one’s heart to the Lord. God desires His people to sing and make music with all their heart to the Lord (5:19). Ephesians 5:19 is in a context of external behavior twenty-four hours a day—whether assembled or not. Paul encouraged the Ephesians to “Have nothing do with the fruitless deeds of darkness, but rather expose them” (5:11). The following chart sets forth the deeds of darkness that Paul warns against:

### LIVING AS CHILDREN OF LIGHT

Ephesians 4:25-32

Ephesians 5:1-8

Therefore each of you must put off falsehood and speak truthfully to his neighbor, for we are all members of one body.<sup>26</sup> “In your anger do not sin”<sup>a</sup>: Do not let the sun go down while you are still angry,<sup>27</sup> and do not give the devil a

Be imitators of God, therefore, as dearly loved children<sup>2</sup> and live a life of love, just as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us as a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God.<sup>3</sup> But among you there must not be even a hint of sexual immorality, or of any

foothold. <sup>28</sup> He who has been stealing must steal no longer, but must work, doing something useful with his own hands, that he may have something to share with those in need. <sup>29</sup> Do not let any unwholesome talk come out of your mouths, but only what is helpful for building others up according to their needs, that it may benefit those who listen. <sup>30</sup> And do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, with whom you were sealed for the day of redemption. <sup>31</sup> Get rid of all bitterness, rage and anger, brawling and slander, along with every form of malice. <sup>32</sup> Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you.

kind of impurity, or of greed, because these are improper for God's holy people. <sup>4</sup> Nor should there be obscenity, foolish talk or coarse joking, which are out of place, but rather thanksgiving. <sup>5</sup> For of this you can be sure: No immoral, impure or greedy person—such a man is an idolater—has any inheritance in the kingdom of Christ and of God. <sup>6</sup> Let no one deceive you with empty words, for because of such things God's wrath comes on those who are disobedient. <sup>7</sup> Therefore do not be partners with them.

Once more, a word of note concerning Ephesians 5:11 is in order. This passage is frequently cited in order to justify separation from other sincere Christians over trivial doctrinal issues, particularly in the Stone-Campbell Movement. This Scripture is another example of twisting Scripture in order to maintain the traditions of the church fathers. This Scripture is alluded to because of its reference to **“fruitless deeds of darkness.”** The interpretation placed upon this phrase is frequently latched onto in order to justify one's separation from other Christians who participate in the use of individual communion cups in the Lord's Supper, teaching children and adults in Sunday school classes, and the acceptance of instrumental music as scriptural and pleasing to God in the Messianic Age, and so on. **This phrase—“fruitless deeds of darkness”—has to do with the works of the flesh, not the frivolous things that Christians fight over. Remember the following before you seek to interpret any Scripture: CONTEXT, CONTEXT, and CONTEXT.**

## CONCLUSION

**This chapter began with an analysis of Paul's expression—“mystery”—to describe the spiritual blessings available in Christ Jesus.** This study also sought to briefly examine election, adoption, and predestination in light of Paul's explanation of the “mystery of God's will.” In addition to this emphasis upon the word *mystery*, this article also called attention to the misapplication of certain Scriptures—1:3-14; 4:5; 5:19; and 5:11. The discussion of this short Epistle has zeroed in on the context for its analysis. Without context, we can build our own belief system without the intent of the inspired author(s). It is also significant that Paul began this Epistle with an explanation of the “mystery” of God and concludes this Epistle with a request for prayer in order that he might be faithful, in spite of persecution, to proclaim the Gospel of God without fear of man's power of destruction. He brings to a close this Epistle with the following words:

Pray also for me, that whenever I open my mouth, words may be given me so that I will fearlessly make known the mystery of the gospel,<sup>20</sup> for which I am an ambassador in chains. Pray that I may declare it fearlessly, as I should. (6:19-20)

This mystery is about God’s methodology of redemption, namely, Jesus Christ. It is “in” and “through” Jesus that one obtains salvation. Throughout this Epistle, one discovers the following expressions that set forth election, adoption, and predestination as occurring in a particular person: “in Him,” “in the One,” “in the Lord Jesus,” “through Jesus Christ,” “in Christ Jesus,” “in Christ,” “in the Lord,” and “through Him.” God accomplished, according to Paul, salvation for all who put their trust in Jesus (1:13). He writes that one can approach God with freedom and confidence “in him” (ἐν αὐτῷ, *en autō*, 1:4) and “through faith in him” (διὰ τῆς πίστεως, *dia tēs pisteōs*, 3:12).

## FREQUENCY OF SIGNIFICANT WORDS

The word “*Christ*” appears 49 times in the Book of Ephesians; this name appears 12 times in Chapter one. The name “*Jesus*” appears 20 times in this short Epistle. “*In Christ*” appears 13 times; “*in Him*” appears 9 times; “*through Jesus Christ*” appears 1 time; the word “*Gospel*” appears 5 times; the word “*grace*” appears 11 times; the word “*faith*” appears 8 times; the word “*peace*” appears 8 times; and the word “*mystery*” appears 7 times.