



**Jonesboro Heights Baptist Church**  
Sanford, North Carolina

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**The Mystery of Togetherness**  
**Ephesians 3:1-12**

Christmas has passed, the new year has come, and 2009 has dawned on us. Are all the special days over for a while?

Not quite! This Tuesday, January 6, will be the Day of Epiphany. Though Epiphany doesn't receive nearly as much attention as Christmas (often it doesn't get *any* attention among Baptists), the early church actually celebrated Epiphany long before it began to celebrate Christmas. They linked it to the visit of the Magi to the Christ child Jesus that we read about at the beginning of our service this morning from Matthew 2:1-12. In fact, down to this day the Eastern Orthodox Churches celebrate the birth of Christ at Epiphany rather than on December 25 as the Western churches do.

Now the significance of Epiphany is to celebrate how Christ came as the light of the world—not only as the Jewish Messiah, but as the Savior of the world, the Lord of all nations. In the visit of the Magi, the early church saw the revelation of the Christ to the world and the nations coming to and bowing before the Lord.

So today, this Sunday before it, we focus on Epiphany.

We're looking at a text today, Ephesians 3:1-12,<sup>1</sup> that teaches us about an important Epiphany theme, "The Mystery of Togetherness." Listen to what Paul wrote . . .

**READ TEXT . . .**

***Some context . . .***

To get a fuller perspective on what Paul was saying in this passage, it's important to put the text in the context of the letter as a whole.

Following the basic pattern of most ancient letters, Paul begins with his greeting. Then he offers a doxology, praising God for his glorious grace that he has lavished on us in Jesus Christ according to his eternal redemptive purpose. Then he offers a moving prayer for his readers, asking God to enlighten the eyes of their hearts so they can see the greatness of his resurrection power at work in those who have put their faith in Christ.

He goes on to describe in powerful terms what God has done in Christ to redeem us individually, emphasizing that it's all by God's grace received through faith, not by our own good works.

But our redemption is also corporate. So Paul goes on to describe how we Gentiles have been included in God's eternal plan, so that through Christ and his cross and resurrection he has

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<sup>1</sup> Unless otherwise indicated, Scripture quotations are from the *New International Version*.

created in himself “one new humanity” (2:15, NRSV) out of Jews and Gentiles, breaking down “the dividing wall of hostility” (2:14) between the two. Now the real temple is the church of Jesus Christ, “built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets with Christ Jesus himself as the chief cornerstone” (2:20), and it includes believers from every race, both Jews and Gentiles with no distinction.

### ***Mystery and ministry***

In the third chapter, Paul turns to tell his readers how he has been entrusted with the special stewardship of preaching to the Gentiles “the unsearchable riches of Christ” (3:8). He says that this mystery was revealed to him through God’s grace. It wasn’t made known in past generations, but now by his Spirit God has revealed it to his “holy apostles and prophets” (3:1-5).

Now when we think of a mystery, we often think about something that if you discover enough clues about it, you can figure it out—you know, like a murder mystery. They’ve come and gone one after another, and they’ve taken a lot of different forms, but some of the most perennially popular TV shows through the years have been police or detective shows that involve solving murder mysteries or the like.

But in the New Testament, a mystery is something we humans *can’t* discover. It has to be *revealed* to us by God. So Paul says that in previous generations, God had not revealed this mystery, this plan for the ages. But now he has.

And what is the mystery? “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). *Together*—both Jews and Gentiles through faith in Christ.

Now what Paul is saying here was in many ways very radical. There were still at this point some in the church who firmly believed that to share in God’s salvation, a Gentile had to become a Jew first, then become a Christian. And the separation between Jews and Gentiles was still very firm in a lot of ways.

But Paul declares that by God’s grace, he was called to preach the unsearchable riches of Christ *to the Gentiles* (3:7-9).

And he further declares that God’s intent in how he was doing things is to show through this church that’s made up of both Jews and Gentiles God’s manifold wisdom “to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly realms according to his eternal purpose which he accomplished in Christ Jesus our Lord” (3:10-11).

And so now, he says, in Christ, all believers (Jews and Gentiles) have access in him through his faith to approach God “with freedom and confidence” (3:12).

So through all this, *Paul told his readers how God revealed his purpose to include the Gentiles in his redemptive plan.* And in his ministry and mission to the Gentiles, Paul was a steward of this mystery.

### ***Living the mystery***

So what does all this mean for us as followers of Jesus today?

As we think today about Epiphany, the revelation of the Messiah to the nations through the visit of the Magi, this text reminds us of the *mystery of togetherness*—how God has worked in Christ to bring us together in him, to save persons from all nations as a people for himself.

You see, the significance of the visit of the Magi was that the wise men of the nations were coming to worship the Messiah of Israel!

About this time in history, not only were the Jews expecting a Messiah; *the world* was looking for a mighty king to arise. Even the Roman historians Suetonius and Tacitus noted a widespread belief, especially in the East, that a mighty ruler was to arise from Judea.<sup>2</sup>

When the Magi, these scholars who were careful watchers of the night sky, saw this new star of Bethlehem in the sky, they believed it was the sign in the heavens that this mighty king had been born, and they set out to see him and pay him homage. Their visit foreshadowed in a very powerful way what Paul talks about in this passage in Ephesians—how Christ was revealed to the Gentiles, and how many Gentiles came to have faith in him. It's no coincidence that early in his Gospel, Matthew includes Gentile women who became believers in the Lord God of Israel in Jesus' genealogy (Rahab of Jericho and Ruth of Moab; Matthew 1:5) and tells of the Magi's visit, and that he ends it with Jesus' commission to "go and make disciples of all nations" (Matthew 28:19)!

So the point of it all is simply this: *In Christ, God is bringing all nations together in one body as heirs of God's redemptive promises.*

When you think about it, this truth has a multitude of implications. Let's briefly consider three of them . . .

First, *if this truth were not so, then most of us would be left out of God's redemptive purpose!*

Most of us in this sanctuary today, probably all of us, did not descend from the Jewish nation. We are *Gentiles*. If God hadn't included *all* nations, making Gentiles "fellow heirs and fellow members of the body, and fellow partakers of the promise in Christ Jesus" (Ephesians 3:6, NASB), we would be lost and we'd have no opportunity for salvation! So thank God for this *mystery of togetherness!*

I remember seeing this mystery illustrated so beautifully many years ago as I watched part of the Christmas Eve Midnight Mass from Rome on television. At a certain point in the service, three children brought gifts to the manger—children from three distinct ethnic groups—powerfully portraying how Christ calls *all the nations* to himself!

And then consider this: *God's revelation of this mystery of togetherness is a call to mission.*

As we begin this year of our Lord 2009, the Christian mission has made tremendous advances, particularly in the last half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and the first decade of the 21<sup>st</sup>. There are more Christians in the world today than ever before, and God is doing some amazing things around the world. Churches in countries that were mission fields not so many decades ago are now sending missionaries, sometimes to nations that have historically been the senders of missionaries!

But there are still so many who have never heard the gospel! We must continue to support missions with our prayers, our gifts, and our personal involvement. That is central to the mission and vision of our church; it's at the heart of *embodying the presence of Christ to Sanford and the world*. It's one of our core values as a congregation: *hands-on relationship driven missions*.

We must be ever mindful that in a very real sense, the world has come to Sanford and Lee County! You don't have to go very far to see people from almost all the major races and ethnic

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<sup>2</sup> William Barclay, *The Gospel of Matthew, Volume 1 in The Daily Bible Study Series, Revised Edition* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1975), 25-27.

groups right here in our city and county. The major cities of our state have in a very real sense become international. If you don't believe that, just go to one of the malls in the Triangle, the Triad, or Fayetteville and listen to the multitude of languages being spoken. And smaller cities like ours aren't far behind!

Some of these people are Christians, many are not. But God has bought the nations here, and we have the responsibility to proclaim the gospel to them through deeds of love and words of witness, and to welcome them into the family of God when they believe!

And finally, consider this. *This mystery of togetherness calls us to accept one another in Christ.* We are heirs together, members together, and sharers together. The key word is *together!* That's the reality in Christ; we must recognize it and put it into practice! I thank God that more and more we're seeing this happen in our church!

There's no place that this togetherness is portrayed and lived out more powerfully than at the Lord's Table in Holy Communion. When we share in Communion, we gather around the Table with all our hurts and humiliations, our joys and jubinations, our foibles and failures, our love and loyalty. As we take the bread and the cup with thankful hearts that we've carefully examined beforehand, through faith in Christ we share in a mystic sweet communion with him, our Lord and Savior, and with his body, the church—one another, *together* in Christ, welcoming and accepting each other as fellow heirs, fellow members of the body, fellow partakers of the promise, in love and mutual respect.

My beloved brothers and sisters, *in Jesus Christ, God is bringing all nations together in one body as heirs of God's redemptive promises.*

Thanks be to God for this *mystery of togetherness!*

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