

CHURCH UNITY, EPH3:1-13

Awed By God #6

◆Intro: During the WW2 era, leader Joseph Stalin of Russia decided to destroy the Lutheran Church in Russia. They were to be a case study in how all the Christian denominations might eventually be liquidated. The removal of the Christian church in Russia had roots far earlier. In December 1917 the Red regime transferred control of parish schools and seminaries to the Commissariat for the People's Education. Civil marriage was instituted as the only legal means of marriage and the churches were deprived of their right to register births and marriages. On February 2, 1918 all financial support for church institutions was cut off and payment of clergy salaries was stopped. On February 5, 1918 a comprehensive decree was issued which provided for "the separation of the Church from the state and the school from the Church." Teaching religion in both public and private schools was forbidden. All property now owned by churches and religious organizations – land, church buildings, church furnishings, parsonages, schools and welfare institutions – were to become the property of the state. In 1921 the teaching of religion to anyone under the age of 18 was forbidden.

◆In the removal of the Lutheran church, Stalin began by having the pastors killed or imprisoned. Then Bibles, hymnbooks and religious writings were destroyed. Lutheran families were broken up: men forced into the army; women and children loaded into boxcars like cattle and scattered throughout remote regions of the Soviet Union –the deserts of Islamic republics, and the arctic wastelands of Siberia. In a shockingly brief time it appeared that the Lutheran Church of the Soviet Union has been wiped off the face of the earth.

CHURCH UNITY, EPH3:1-13

Awed By God #6

◆ Ah, but those who know God know something more. As the Heidelberg Catechism puts it (Q54),

◆ “I believe that the Son of God, through his Spirit and Word, out of the entire human race, from the beginning of the world to its end, gathers, protects, and preserves for himself a community a chosen for eternal life, and united in true faith. And of this community I am and always will be a living member.”

◆ **1. We, the church, display the mystery of God’s glory in our community.** Verse 10 is the central idea of our text, I think.

◆ “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,” Ephesians 3:10, NIV.

◆ That is to say, that God’s family on earth, which we call the Church, is meant to display his amazing, multifaceted, iridescent wisdom. The term we have rendered “manifold” carries the sense of multiple refracted colors, as in a jewel, like a prism effect or rainbow. For those of you of the video game generation, its something like a nintendo game in which your hero discovers a treasure chest and opening it, sees a shiny jewel elevated into the air above him, spinning in brilliant beauty as a musical chord intones. The Church is like that elevated jewel, a prize of beauty. Now what is it that deserves this enchanting delight?

◆ A. First it’s opposite so we can more readily understand. There is often, even among followers of Christ a schismatic mentality that chants “us four and no more!” or “come out from among them!” This is the erroneous concept that the pleasing of God comes most from purity, which may be

CHURCH UNITY, EPH3:1-13

Awed By God #6

defined as our separation from those with flaws, errors, or misunderstandings. The goal in schism is to filter out the correct select followers. This movement takes on many shapes but it's emphasis on being more "right" than other followers of Jesus often earns them the title "the Frozen Chosen", for few of this bent act with much charity toward others who differ either in slight doctrine or tradition.

◆ For example, this past week our local ministers group sang together, led without instrument, from a book of psalms, as was the tradition of one of our member churches here in town. This was their practice and was certainly well received by the rest that morning. Did you know that in 1857 when our denomination separated from the RCA, one of the reasons for our parting ways was that the RCA sang songs taken from beyond the scriptural "psalms" alone, and our forefathers deemed that unholy? The CRC began in part with the concept that true Christians should only sing the words of scripture! Now today, we follow the words of Scripture in Ephesians 5:18 and we "speak to one another in psalms, hymns, AND spiritual songs!" Now, what songs to sing need not separate God-followers, but it has been used that way.

◆ The questions of what should separate people arise often. The questions of what is sinful and harmful, and what is mere tradition are easy to confuse. Suppose a church allows active homosexuals to serve as clergy? Is that sinful? What if they allow women to serve as clergy? Is that sinful on the same level? Suppose a church turns a blind eye to sons who sleep with their cougar mothers? Apparently

CHURCH UNITY, EPH3:1-13

Awed By God #6

the church in Corinth had that problem going on and Paul rebuked them for it. There was a time when some churches, including our own denomination considered it sinful to dance, even though King David, the writer of the holy psalms did so! Now, while it is necessary to make judgments and to pursue holiness, the schismatic mentality goes further, tending to run from any who are not just like them. These type place more emphasis on pushing others away when in reality the church is meant to be a body that draws others in.

◆ Perhaps you've heard of comedian Emo Phillips conversation with a new acquaintance. On discovering that he too was a believer, Emo asked, "Are you Protestant or Catholic?" Protestant. "Me too! What denomination?" Baptist. "Me too! Northern Baptist or Southern?" Northern Baptist. "Wow this is amazing, so am I!" This continued for several more delightful rounds until finally the question arose, "Northern, conservative, fundamentalist Baptist, Great Lakes Region, Council of 1879, or Northern, conservative, fundamentalist Baptist, Great Lakes Region, Council of 1912?" When the reply came "Northern, conservative, fundamentalist, Baptist, Great Lakes Region, Council of 1912," he replied in utter disdain, "Die Heretic!"

◆ Needless to say, the schismatic leaning tendency does not impress a waiting world with the wonder of gracious God.

◆ B. On the other hand, when the church is the communion of the saints, it becomes a iridescent display of God's wisdom. This seems to be what amazes Paul in our text: that the unexpected gentiles are just as "saved" and just as blessed as the covenant family of Israel.

CHURCH UNITY, EPH3:1-13

Awed By God #6

- ◆ Look at the three “together” phrases of verse six: *“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.” Ephesians 3:6, NIV.*
- ◆ Now the Jews knew that gentiles could be included and could join the kingdom. But they never thought they would be as special as the Jews were. Yet Paul emphasized “inheritors together,” “members together”, and “sharers together”. They were supposed to be second class, or economy class, a lower court in the temple. Not the same court!
- ◆ The Puritan Richard Baxter is quoted as saying, “In essentials unity, in non-essentials liberty, in all things charity.” Isn’t this what amazes people most? Everyone finds it easy to get along with the like-minded. If you dress like me, I’m at ease with you. If you dress all funky, or all gothic, and I’m not, well... for most people discomfort sets in. If you buy the kinds of things I buy, if you like the kinds of things I like, I feel almost instantly at ease with you, right? A business-dressed fellow walks up to a Harley rider in his doo-rag and says, “Oo nice hog, man. How many cc’s does she have?” Right away there’s a possible connection. Comfort is more possible. But when *different* folks display love across *differences*, now that’s something you don’t see everyday, do you?
- ◆ The mystery is that in the Good News of Jesus sacrificial death, enemies become friends. Unlike people become family. Traitors become leaders! That’s right. Paul was a traitor of sorts, wasn’t he.

CHURCH UNITY, EPH3:1-13

Awed By God #6

◆V8: “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,” Ephesians 3:8, NIV.

◆Why does Paul call himself least? Well, in another letter he spells it out. “For I am the least of the apostles and do not even deserve to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God.” 1 Corinthians 15:9, NIV. Paul, the traitor to Christians is now a leader of Christians. The like and unlike together. It’s the unexpected novelty of the mix that displays to all the world (notably the spiritual realms, angels and demons) that God is like no other! Wise and loving beyond all expectations! With the example of himself, and with the example of the inclusion of gentiles Paul is showing us that formerly *clashing* elements have formed one new body! The more the Church rises above it’s differences and lives and works in harmony, the more the marvel of God is declared even in the spirit realm!

◆It’s amazing really. In the early Church there was a remarkable togetherness: Medes, Elamites, Judeans, Cappadoccians. While there were some arguments that needed working out, we have no lingering factions in the NT of “Paulites”, or “Peterians”.

◆**2. We, the church, attract the world by our unity.** A visitor to a mental hospital was astonished that there were hundreds of dangerous, and highly unusual residents, and only 3 security personale. She asked one guard, “Aren’t you afraid?” “No,” he said, lunatics never unite.” Jesus in his prayer for his followers just before he went to die on the cross, prayed not for them to be more right than others (he did pray that their lives would be cleansed by the truth Jn17:17), not to live a bubbly life of happiness, not

CHURCH UNITY, EPH3:1-13

Awed By God #6

have a lot of fun. He prayed that they would get along. That they would be unified. Why? Watch for the reason...

◆““My prayer is not for them alone. I pray also for those who will believe in me through their message, that all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you. May they also be in us so *that the world may believe that you have sent me*. I have given them the glory that you gave me, that they may be one as we are one: I in them and you in me. May they be brought to complete unity *to let the world know that you sent me* and have loved them even as you have loved me.” John 17:20-23, NIV.

◆Did you catch it? Unity of Christians leads to belief in Christ! As Max Lucado once asked, could it be that racial problems and moral problems aren't the sign of our society, or of a poor government, but of a disunified church?

◆Who are we to think a single congregation or even denomination can represent all the facets of God's beauty? We already know that God parcels out his gifts (spiritual gifts) over different people. No one person has them all. We all display his grace in it's various forms. And so do churches.

◆B. What is the application of this marvel called the Church, made up of so many different types of folks all saved by grace? Paul tells us in the next chapter but lets take a peek now.

◆“Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace. There is one body and one Spirit--just as you were called to one hope when you were called-- one Lord, one faith, one baptism;

CHURCH UNITY, EPH3:1-13

Awed By God #6

one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all.”

Ephesians 4:3-6, NIV.

◆And elsewhere:

◆“May the God who gives endurance and encouragement give you a spirit of unity among yourselves as you follow Christ Jesus, so that with one heart and mouth you may glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. Accept one another, then, just as Christ accepted you, in order to bring praise to God.” Romans 15:5-7, NIV.

◆Do not get this wrong, people. The Church doesn't admit members because they have been good enough citizens. Preachers don't preach the word because they are no longer sinners like all the other members. (One former church member once complained to me that preachers are paid to be good; the rest of the members were “good for nothing!”) No friends, the great marvel of God's family is that every one of us is here by grace, the life-long follower (like Israel) and the persecutor-turned-evangelist (like Paul.)

◆Grace doesn't mean we don't care about goodness. It does mean we are compassionate in the midst of badness. And so, in the church offenses happen too. And in the church people hurt each other's feelings. And in the church people sin and chose wrongly. And in the church people can feel left out. But in the church people say they are sorry. And in the church black and white are friends. And in the church sinners are urged to come back to God's good ways, and are prayed for as loved friends. And in the church rich and poor eat together. And in the church people include you even if you are not

CHURCH UNITY, EPH3:1-13

Awed By God #6

famous! In the church, all celebrated accomplishment is the grace of Christ. This is what is amazing about the place where God is.

◆ *The great paradox [of my life] is that every time I walk into a prison and see the faces of men or women who have been transformed by the power of the living God, I realize that the thing God has chosen to use in my life ... is none of the successes, achievements, degrees, awards, honors, or cases I won before the Supreme Court. That's not what God's using in my life. What God is using in my life to touch the lives of literally thousands of other people is the fact that I was a convict and went to prison. That was my great defeat, the only thing in my life I didn't succeed in. Chuck Colson, Sermon "[The Gravy Train Gospel](#),"*

◆ What is Colson seeing? The power of inversion through the hand of God. Where a convict can help people become free, and a murdering Jew can spread the gospel, and the gentile becomes brother to the hebrew, and even prison (from where Paul writes to the Ephesians) is not the final word.

◆ "For this reason I, Paul, the prisoner of Christ Jesus for the sake of you Gentiles--" Ephesians 3:1, NIV.

◆ "I ask you, therefore, not to be discouraged because of my sufferings for you, which are your glory." Ephesians 3:13, NIV.

◆ **Conclusion:** Back to the Lutheran Church in Russia in the mid 1900's... Though scattered the Lutheran women, without pastors, without buildings, without bibles, without songbooks –sought each other out across the miles of desolation. They met in one another's homes to pray and care for each

CHURCH UNITY, EPH3:1-13

Awed By God #6

other. They wrote down all the religious instruction they could remember by heart: verses, catechism answers, songs, liturgies. They held worship. They passed it on to their children at the risk of further imprisonment. Some of the surrounding people became Christians too. Communities of believers formed and appointed elders and deacons and the Lutheran Church in Russia was slowly reborn. Today it meets in hundreds of house churches. In recent years established a seminary. It has outlasted communism which is erroneously supposed to be about community. This is why we are in awe of God!