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GOD'S ETERNAL PURPOSE

by ANDREW BORLAND

MR. BORLAND, Editor of "The Believer's Magazine", has for long made a special study of the Epistle to the Ephesians, as readers of that periodical are well aware. His present article examines some aspects of the central theme of that Epistle.

IN his recent commentary on the Epistle to the Ephesians,¹ Professor Bruce has reminded readers that that most fastidious of literary critics, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, described the epistle as "the divinest composition of man," a judgment with which most discerning students of literature will agree. Yet the epistle may be read and the magnificence of its conception of the unsearchable riches of the grace of God in measure apprehended without the discovery that one of the amazing features thereof is the fact that the apostle, evidently without deliberately attempting to do so, has set out, perhaps as nowhere else in the Scriptures, an outline scheme of the entire divine programme, especially as it affects God's purposes in grace. Here the writer claims that God has made known the mystery of His will according to His good pleasure which He has purposed in Himself (1: 9). Here, too, he informs us that God is One who works all things after the counsel of His own will (1: 11), such statements being intended to convey the assurance that God is capable of carrying out to their glorious fulfilment all that He in grace has purposed for His redeemed. "The riches of His grace," His "wisdom and prudence," His "good pleasure" are seen to operate harmoniously to order cosmic events so that all things work together for good to the final accomplishment of all that He had pre-ordained for His own glory. In his survey of the divine plan the apostle sweeps "from before the foundation of the world" (1: 4) "unto all generations for ever and ever" (3: 21). The numerous time-references form a most interesting feature of the epistle.

I. BEFORE THE FOUNDATION OF THE WORLD

Carrying us back in one magnificent statement regarding the

¹ F. F. Bruce, *The Epistle to the Ephesians* (London: Pickering & Inglis Ltd. 1961. 140 pp. 13s. 6d.). The quotations in this article (apart from Bible quotations) are all taken from this commentary.

mystery of God's eternal purpose, Paul affirms that God "chose us in him (i.e., Christ) before the foundation of the world" (1: 4). Discounting the unsubstantiated translation "before the downfall of the world," it is clear that the apostle was referring to a divine activity before the creation of the universe. For the apostle, who had not conferred with flesh and blood on the great truths of the divine revelation (Gal. 1: 16) there was no unsurmountable problem connected with the sovereign electing grace of God. Although the fact transcended human reason, its acceptance did not involve the abandonment of an intellectual grasp of the divine purpose. The apostle conceived of the relationship which subsisted between each believer and God as being part of an eternal plan whose out-working in time had been committed to the Son of God, the good pleasure of the divine will being that those chosen "in Christ before the foundation of the world" should be "to the praise of the glory of his grace" (1: 6).

Moreover, those thus chosen were "fore-ordained unto the adoption of sons" (1: 5). While the electing grace of God throws the mind back into the inscrutable eternal counsels, this fore-ordination projects us forward to the future when the status of all those blessed with sonship "will be given full and universal recognition at the Second Advent of Christ, for the day when the Son of God is revealed will also be the day of 'the revealing of the *sons* of God' (Rom. 8: 19)" (p. 29). Perhaps it is to that particular aspect of the revelation that the apostle John refers when he declares: "Now are we the children of God, and it doth not yet appear what we shall be; but we know that when he shall appear, we shall be like him; for we shall see him as he is" (1 John 3: 2). Some think of that likeness as *physical*, some as *moral*, but perhaps it involves the idea of *filial* relationship as well, when all those who by faith are "in Christ" are manifestly declared to be the children of God. Such a conception of the divine purpose, noble beyond explanation, lifts the scheme of redemption on to the grandest of all planes, relating it not simply to the salvation of certain particular individuals but to the entire cosmic plan of God by which the whole creation which groans and travaills in pain will then be delivered from the bondage of corruption to which it is now subjected because of sin into the glorious liberty of the children of God (Rom. 8: 19-22).

Joyful now the new creation
Rests in undisturbed repose;
Blest in Jesus' full salvation,
Sorrow now nor thralldom knows.

"In the presence of such mystery we do well to be humble, acknowledging the limitations of our own understanding and paying heed to the solemnly practical purpose of God's electing grace" (p. 28).

II. OTHER GENERATIONS OR AGES

When ye read, ye can perceive my understanding in the mystery of Christ which in other generations was not made known unto the sons of men (3: 4-5).

Part of the divine plan, perhaps a major part of it, but by no means the entire plan, was the calling out of the Church which was to be in a special sense the medium through which the glory of God was to be ultimately revealed. Included in that plan was the breaking down of the middle wall of partition between Jews and Gentiles, and the creating of a New Society—"One New Man"—

Composed of all His saints, who own
No Saviour but the Living Stone.

Such an idea was utterly foreign to Jewish religious thought, because no such exhibition of the grace of God had been hinted at in generations past. To convince his readers that divine activity of such a nature was in operation Paul asserts that a special revelation had been given to him so that he might communicate the truth of the "mystery of Christ" which had not been hitherto disclosed.

The apostle adverted to the same theme in other epistles. In Romans 15: 25 he wrote along the same lines but less explicitly about the revelation of the mystery which had been kept secret since the world began, while in Colossians 1: 26 he declared, presumably at the same time as he penned the Ephesian epistle, that to him had been committed a special dispensation (stewardship) of "the mystery which had been hid from ages and generations." From the beginning of the world it had been "hid in God" (Eph. 3: 9), that is, it was an integral part of a divine plan which had not been revealed but which had existed in the eternal purpose of God. That mystery, or divine secret which was now being divulged, consequently finds no place in the Old Testament record and goes far beyond the blessing of the Gentiles promised to Abraham centuries before (Gen. 12: 3) and in numerous subsequent declarations of Jehovah preserved in the prophetic writings. In confirmation of the divine intention Paul, writing to the Romans, quotes several passages from the Old Testament to confirm his contention "that Jesus Christ was a minister of the circumcision for the truth of God, to confirm the promises made to the fathers,

and that the Gentiles might glorify God for his mercy, as it is written:

- (a) For this cause I will confess to thee among the Gentiles, and sing unto thy name (2 Sam. 22: 50; Psa. 18: 49).
- (b) And again he saith, Rejoice, ye Gentiles, with his people (Deut. 32: 43).
- (c) And again, Praise the Lord, all ye Gentiles, and laud him, all ye people (Psa. 117: 1).
- (d) And again, Esaias saith, there shall be a root of Jesse, and he shall rise to reign over the Gentiles (Isa. 11: 10)."

"But," to quote Professor Bruce, "what was not foreseen in Old Testament times was the fact that these promised gospel-blessings would involve the creation of 'one new man' (Eph. 2: 15) by the incorporation of Jewish and Gentile believers alike, on the common ground of divine grace, as fellow-members of the body of Christ" (p. 61). While there were those promises of blessings to come, the "other generations" had no intimation of the far grander purpose yet to be revealed in the advent of the "Saviour of the world."

III. NOW

But *now* in Christ Jesus ye that once were far off are made nigh in the blood of Christ (2: 13).

It hath *now* been revealed unto his holy apostles and prophets in the Spirit (3: 5).

To the intent that *now* unto the principalities and the powers in the heavenly places might be made known through the church the manifold wisdom of God (3: 10).

These three verses are amazingly comprehensive in their scope, the "now" being dispensational rather than temporal. God has, in this present gospel-age, brought to light His eternal purpose, and has chosen to reveal its content to His "holy apostles and prophets," those first-century Christians to whom, by the Spirit of God, was communicated the secret which could not have been understood by merely human mental effort. The revelation contained a threefold message.

(a) Believing Gentiles should be fellow-heirs with believing Jews (3: 6). The theme of the inheritance must have been much in the apostle's thought as he wrote his prison epistles, as witness his references in chapter 1. There Christ is seen as the heir of all things, the One in whom all things are to be summed up (v. 10), in whom also believing Jews "were made a heritage" of God. In Him believing Gentiles, too, had come to share the same privilege (v. 13), the "ye also" being meant to emphasize the fact that Gentiles as well as Jews were part now of God's own possession

(v. 14), and shared equally with Jewish believers the blessings and privileges of the New Covenant.

(b) Gentiles should be fellow-members of Christ, by faith being incorporated into the living unity of the New Society which had the risen Christ for its Head, so that one of the seven uniquenesses of the Christian Faith is: "there is one body" (4: 4). In the present dispensation God has made of the two, Jew and Gentile, "one new man," reconciling "them both in one body—through the cross" (2: 16). The enmity existing between the two sections of the human race has been slain, for in Christ, the Peace-maker, there could be no distinction of any kind.

(c) Gentiles should be "fellow-partakers of the promise in Christ Jesus." Under the old economy, which more or less exclusively embraced the Jewish nation, Gentiles had been "strangers to the covenants of promise" made to Abraham and his descendants, but now, when the exceeding riches of God's grace was manifested, they were "no more strangers and sojourners, but fellow-citizens with the saints and of the household of God" (2: 19). Now, irrespective of national or any other kind of distinction, all believers enter into the inheritance and share in all the blessings promised to those who are in Christ Jesus.

That same truth is stated elsewhere in the epistle thus: "Now in Christ Jesus ye that once were far off are made nigh in the blood of Christ" (2: 13). The marvel is that by yielding up His life as a voluntary sin-offering Christ Jesus has made possible what was beforetime impossible, namely, that the Gentiles who were by nature "afar off" could be brought nigh to God and could occupy in the New Society the place of privilege that once belonged exclusively to the Jewish nation.

That New Society, the Church, the Body of Christ, is called God's "workmanship," a word variously translated as "master-piece," "work of art," "poem," the noblest expression of the "eternal purpose which he purposed in Christ Jesus our Lord" (3: 11). Such a display of the many-hued wisdom of God is forming an object lesson to principalities and powers, those unseen spectators, both good and bad, who witness with wonder the triumph of God's grace "in overcoming an otherwise insurmountable barrier and uniting the two sections of mankind in Christ" (p. 64).

IV. THE FULNESS OF THE TIMES

The mystery of God's will is said to be "according to his good pleasure which he purposed in him unto the dispensation of the

fulness of the times, to sum up all things in Christ, the things in the heavens, and the things upon the earth" (1: 10).

"The dispensation of the fulness of the times" is a remarkable expression, and is somewhat similar to the one employed about the First Advent, of which we read in Galatians 4: 4 that it took place "when the fulness of the time was come"; that is, when the time in the providence of God was ripe for fulfilment God sent forth His Son. The statement here refers to the completion of all the varied aspects of the divine purpose, "the fulness of the times" being the climax of all the dispensations of God's dealings which had preceded, the ultimate goal of all the redemptive activity of God within the cosmos. God is considered the Grand Administrator of the "all things," the sum total of everything, and His design is to harmonize the entire universe under the government of Christ, that government extending to "the things in the heavens, and the things upon the earth." Neither dissenting voice nor discordant note will be heard throughout that universe of bliss when Christ is not only Head over all things to the Church as He is now, but also Head of the whole redeemed creation. Included in that triumph will be the redemption of God's own possession (1: 14). What a thrilling consummation for the Victor of Calvary!

V. THE AGES TO COME

It is the divine purpose that "in the ages to come" God will "show the exceeding riches of his grace in his kindness towards us in Christ Jesus" (2: 7). Against the dark background of man's sinful disobedience and God's wrath are set the divine mercy and the great love wherewith God has loved us. Man's salvation depends entirely upon the grace of God, for salvation by grace through faith is declared to be "the gift of God." The apostle's thought carries the mind beyond men's ordinary concepts of time into "the ages to come." "In the limitless future, as age succeeds age, the crowning display of God's grace will ever be His kindness to His redeemed people, not simply in pardoning their sins, but in raising them up to share the place which Christ occupies by right in the heavenly sphere. . . . If the raising of Christ from death to sit at His own right hand is the supreme demonstration of God's power, the raising of the people of Christ from spiritual death to share Christ's place of exaltation is the supreme demonstration of His grace" (p. 51).

VI. UNTO ALL GENERATIONS FOR EVER AND EVER

The doxology closing the first part of the epistle is so transcendently wonderful that it is worthy of full transcription: "Now

unto him that is able to do exceeding abundantly above all that we ask or think, according to the power that worketh in us, unto him be glory in the church in Christ Jesus unto all generations for ever and ever. Amen." The mind is staggered as it muses upon the ultimate triumph of the purpose of God. There is no limit to the exceeding greatness of divine power, the ability of God far out-ranging the highest conception of the apostle. As age succeeds age, and eternity rolls on in its endlessness, the glory of God will continue to be revealed in the Church of His redeemed, as all those who have shared in the blessings of His grace are for ever associated with the Beloved One who has been enthroned at the right hand of the Majesty in the heavens. "Since it is God's will 'in the ages to come' to display 'the exceeding riches of His grace' in those who have been its most signal beneficiaries, so throughout these coming ages, one age supervening upon another into the remotest infinity, it is that excelling grace of His which will redound to His highest glory" (p. 71).

Irvine, Ayrshire.