

MINISTRY BY MAIL
Lutheran Conference of Confessional Fellowship
www.lutheranlccf.org
Sunday after New Year, January 5, 2014

✠ ✠ ✠

(Hymns found in The Lutheran Hymnal, CPH, 1941)

Hymns: 129, 361:1-3, 126, 127, 132:5.

Lessons: Isaiah 60:1-6, 1 Corinthians 2:1-16, Matthew 2:1-12.

Sermon Text: Ephesians 3:2-6.

Sermon by Pastor Robert Mehlretter

In the name of Jesus Christ, Dear Fellow Redeemed,

Tomorrow, January 6, is Epiphany. Epiphany has been called the Christmas of the Gentiles. It is the day that the churches called Eastern Catholic or Eastern Orthodox celebrate the birth of Jesus.

It is also a day that we Gentiles can reflect on the fact that

GENTILES, TOO, ARE INVITED TO COME TO CHRIST AND BELIEVE

- 1. Paul was a missionary to Gentiles.**
- 2. We are among the fruits of such ministry, such mission work.**

Genealogical research has become an important part of many peoples' lives today. Many people today are researching their ancestry – where their ancestors came from, what they did for a living, how they came to live where they settled and other details of their lives.

People have different reasons for this research. They may include wanting a sense of belonging to a group, and searching for a sense of identity.

But there may be one thing you haven't searched for if you have ever wondered about your ancestors. Most of us have no idea how it is that the truths of God's Word were revealed to us or to our ancestors.

Few of us know how it is that we ended up here, meaning in this church, or how our parents or grandparents or ancestors even farther back came to know the Gospel, perhaps from a Lutheran church or in a Lutheran church. We may have some vague idea of how we ended up in this church, but probably no accurate idea of when the gospel was first proclaimed to our ancestors.

But although the details may not be known to us, the fact is that someone revealed Jesus Christ as your only Savior from sin to you – or to one or another of your ancestors.

Above all, you must realize that it was God himself who worked faith in you. We know that no one gets to heaven because of the faith of someone else. But humans, people, do teach others the Word of God, and it is that Word of God which works faith. And behind it all there was someone who proclaimed, taught, preached the Gospel to your Gentile ancestors – or to you as a Gentile.

Paul writes: *"Surely you have heard about the administration of God's grace that was given to me for you, that is, the mystery made known to me by revelation, as I have already written briefly."* When we look at the whole letter to the Ephesian Christians, we realize that Paul, by inspiration of God, is emphasizing the grace of God for the believers, or, as we read in the first sentence of our text *"for you."* One writer paraphrased the verse in this way: Surely you have heard that it was for your benefit, not mine, Paul writes, that God called me to administer his grace.

In writing to the Romans, Paul made it very clear that he was called especially to preach the Gospel of Jesus Christ to the Gentiles. *"I have written you quite boldly on some points, as if to remind you of them again, because of the grace God gave me to be a minister of Christ Jesus to the Gentiles with the priestly duty of proclaiming the gospel of God, so that the Gentiles might become an offering acceptable to God, sanctified by the Holy Spirit. Therefore I glory in Christ Jesus in my service to God. I will not venture to speak of*

anything except what Christ has accomplished through me in leading the Gentiles to obey God by what I have said and done." (Romans 15:15-18)

If you remember his personal history, you will recall that Paul's faithful preaching of God's grace to Gentiles got him into trouble with his fellow Jews and put him on trial in the Roman legal system. In fact, this letter to the Ephesians was written from Rome, while he was awaiting final disposition of his appeal to Caesar. Paul was at that time under house arrest, a prisoner in Rome, waiting for the disposal of his case before the imperial court. He calls himself the prisoner of Christ on behalf of the Gentiles, because he was suffering this imprisonment for work done in his capacity as minister of Christ, and because it had been principally his proclamation of the Gospel among the Gentiles that had caused his arrest. Both the hatred from the Jews and the suspicion of the Roman government had been brought down upon Paul because he preached Christ Crucified so fearlessly.

But his office of administering God's grace to Gentiles wasn't something Paul chose for himself. It *"was given to me,"* he declares. And so was the message that he preached. It was not his own message, but it was a message from God.

Paul would never have figured out his message by himself. Rather, it was *a "mystery made known to [him] by revelation."* The term "mystery" is used some 20 times in the New Testament—most often by Paul and usually in the sense illustrated here. Paul is not speaking of something that is mysterious in the sense of being vague, murky, or hard to understand but rather something that needs to be explained. After it has been explained, it's perfectly clear, but one would never have stumbled onto it without some outside help. Paul indicates that he received such help from God by revelation.

What was the "mystery" that was explained to Paul? In verse 6 Paul says, *"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."*

The key to the mystery revealed to Paul lies in the expression *"together,"* used three times to translate God's idea. It means that Paul was lead by God to understand that through faith in Christ Gentiles are co-heirs with believing Jews, co-members of one and the same body, that is, the church, and co-sharers with Israel in the salvation that Christ's merit has won. This equality between Jews and Gentiles is parallel to what Paul previously talked about when he stated that Christ's saving purpose in reconciling the world was *"to create in himself one new man out of the two"* (Ephesians 2:15). Paul seems to make reference to his treatment of this subject earlier in the letter when he says, *"As I have already written briefly."* Paul explains, *"In reading this, then, you will be able to understand my insight into the mystery of Christ, 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."*

We must be careful so that we don't misunderstand Paul's words and jump to the conclusion that Gentiles couldn't be saved or that God wasn't interested in them during Old Testament times. Remember that God through the Old Testament prophet Ezekiel said, *"As surely as I live, declares the Sovereign LORD, I take no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but rather that they turn from their ways and live"* (Ezekiel 33:11). These words applied to Gentiles as well as Jews. God also spoke to Isaiah in this way: *"And now the LORD says – he who formed me in the womb to be his servant to bring Jacob back to him and gather Israel to himself, for I am honored in the eyes of the LORD and my God has been my strength – he says: "It is too small a thing for you to be my servant to restore the tribes of Jacob and bring back those of Israel I have kept. I will also make you a light for the Gentiles, that you may bring my salvation to the ends of the earth.""* (Isaiah 49:5-6)

So Gentiles have always been welcome in the kingdom of God. God just chose the Jews to send the Savior first to them. But Paul can still say that the mystery of Christ *"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."* Without using the term "New Testament", Paul in effect is saying: We are in a new era now that the Old Testament prophecies have been fulfilled and the Messiah has come. In this new order, the gospel is being proclaimed not only to Jews but to Gentiles as well. This is illustrated by the call God graciously gave me, Paul.

The term *"gift of God's grace"* is now further explained. God made known unto Paul the mystery or the message by his revealing it to him. Even at the time of his conversion, when the Lord appeared to him on the

way to Damascus, God had informed him of his call as apostle to the Gentiles, in this way revealing to him the “mystery” of his calling. Paul had received neither the information concerning his call nor the subject matter of his proclamation from men. This was given to him from Jesus Christ. We read in Galatians 1:11-12: ***“I want you to know, brothers, that the gospel I preached is not something that man made up. I did not receive it from any man, nor was I taught it; rather, I received it by revelation from Jesus Christ.”***

Of this mystery or message Paul writes that it ***“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.”*** The mystery relating to Christ as the Savior of mankind was indeed revealed to the patriarchs and prophets of old in pictures and in prophecy. But in the times of the Old Testament generations the message was not generally known, nor was it so clear and unmistakable as in the time of its New Testament fulfillment. To his holy apostles, who were incidentally also prophets foretelling the future in many verses of their writing, God revealed the glorious facts concerning salvation in Christ through his Holy Spirit. By the teaching of the Spirit these men gained a full understanding of the relation between prophecy and fulfillment, of the ministry of Christ. Jesus told his disciples in Luke 24:44-48 ***“This is what I told you while I was still with you: ‘Everything must be fulfilled that is written about me in the Law of Moses, the Prophets and the Psalms.’ Then he opened their minds so they could understand the Scriptures. He told them, ‘This is what is written: The Christ will suffer and rise from the dead on the third day, and repentance and forgiveness of sins will be preached in his name to all nations, beginning at Jerusalem. You are witnesses of these things.’”***

The New Testament is filled with explanations of Old Testament scriptures and fulfillment of God’s blessed prophecies about the salvation of mankind.

The content of the mystery as it specifically concerned the Gentiles was that the Gentiles are fellow-heirs and fellow-members and fellow-partakers of the promise in Christ Jesus through the Gospel. Paul piles up the terms in order to emphasize as strongly as possible the full equality of the Gentile Christians with believers of Jewish descent. The Gentiles are heirs with the members of believing Israel. Paul was not only writing to Jewish Christians when he wrote in Romans 8:17: ***“Now if we are children, then we are heirs--heirs of God and co-heirs with Christ, if indeed we share in his sufferings in order that we may also share in his glory.”***

All the blessings offered to the children belong jointly to the same body as the Jewish Christians, to the body of Christ, that is, to the Holy Christian Church. The same promise of eternal salvation in Christ Jesus is extended to them through the preaching of the Gospel.

In the verses immediately after our text, Paul is careful to avoid even the suggestion of self-congratulation in the matter of his calling. In the very next words he writes: ***“I became a servant of this gospel by the gift of God's grace given me through the working of his power. 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, and to make plain to everyone the administration of this mystery, which for ages past was kept hidden in God, who created all things.”*** (Eph.3:7-9)

He became a minister of the Gospel, a servant, not because of any personal merit, but by reason of the free gift of God’s grace. He considered his office a gift of which he was not worthy. And it was not his own wisdom, personal charisma, or any other talent that was effective in his work, but the power of God. He gave all credit to God.

With Paul we can and must say in all matters of our faith, and our coming to God and having the Gospel preached to us or our ancestors “Thanks be to God!”

Just as the Magi worshipped the Christ Child and gave valuable gifts, so, too, may we worship, give thanks, and give back to God! Amen.

(NOTE: This sermon was incorrectly labeled as a printed Ministry By Mail sermon. It was called “Second Sunday after Christmas” with an incorrect date of December 29.)