

The Cosmic Church

by John Piper

The church's cosmic mission is to demonstrate the manifold wisdom of God to the principalities and powers in the heavenly places by living out its unity and hope in Christ.

Scripture: Genesis 12:3, Luke 16:15, Romans 8:19, Ephesians 1:11, Ephesians 2:7, Ephesians 3:10, 1 Peter 1:24

Topics: "Church Unity", "Gods Wisdom"

Description

John Piper preaches about the cosmic significance of the church of Jesus Christ, emphasizing its mission to display the manifold wisdom of God to the supernatural beings in the heavenly places. He delves into the revelation received by Paul regarding the mystery of Christ, the unification of Jews and Gentiles in the church, and the divine wisdom behind God's plan of redemption. Piper challenges believers to live in hope, maintain unity, and demonstrate God's wisdom through their lives, as the church serves as a cosmic showcase of God's mercy to the watching principalities and powers.

Transcript

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Ephesians 3:10

The church of Jesus Christ is the most important institution in the world. The assembly of the redeemed, the company of the saints, the children of God are more significant in world history than any other group, organization or nation. The United States of America compares to the church of Jesus Christ like a speck of dust compares to the sun. The drama of international relations compares to the mission of the church like a kindergarten riddle compares to Hamlet or King Lear. And all pomp of May Day in Red Square and the pageantry of New Year's in Pasadena fade into a formless grey against the splendor of the bride of Christ. Take heed how you judge. Things are not what they seem. "All flesh is like grass. And all its glory like the flower of grass. The grass withers, and the flower falls, but the word of the Lord (and all His family) abide forever" (1 Peter 1:24,25). The media and all the powers, and authorities and rulers and stars that they present are a mirage. "For what is exalted among men is an abomination in the sight of God" (Luke 16:15). The gates of hades, the powers of death, will prevail against every institution but one, the church.

For the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the sons of God ... because the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay and obtain the liberty of the glory of the children of God (Romans 8:19, 21).

Lift up your eyes, O Christians! You belong to a society that will never cease, to the apple of God's eye, to the eternal and cosmic church of our Lord, Jesus Christ.

The text that has filled my mind and made me feel inept this past week is Ephesians 3:10. How can I bring my own heart to sense the grandeur of the mission of the church? And how can I find words that might open the eyes of your heart to see it, too? I feel so inept when I sit down and try to put into words the cosmic significance of the church. But I take heart in these two things: though I am just an earthen vessel and my words are like leaky, clay pots, the truth in this text is so glorious, so fantastic that it may break out and shine on its own if I can just get you to look at it long enough. And the other thing is that Paul followed this section with a prayer in Ephesians 3:14-21 which asked for God's help in comprehending the length and breadth and height and depth of the revelation of Christ.

Let's read Ephesians 3:1-12 again, then, with a view to comprehending the cosmic mission of the church. In chapter two Paul has just finished describing how Christ came and broke down the wall between Jews and gentiles and made them into one people through His death on the cross. In chapter three, verse one he is about to offer the prayer that begins in 3:14, I think, but breaks off in mid-sentence to describe briefly the essence of his life work and how it fits into the cosmic mission of the church. Beginning with 3:1 -

For this reason I, Paul, a prisoner for Christ Jesus on behalf of you gentiles - assuming that you have heard of the stewardship of God's grace that was given to me for you, how the mystery was made known to me by revelation as I have written briefly. When you read this you can perceive my insight into the mystery of Christ, which was not made known to the sons of men in other generations as it has now been revealed to His holy apostles and prophets by the Spirit; that is, how the gentiles are fellow heirs, members of the same body, and partakers of the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel.

Of this gospel I was made a minister according to the gift of God's grace which was given me by the working of his power. To me, though I am the very least of all the saints, this grace was given to preach to the gentiles the unsearchable riches of Christ, and to make all men see what is the plan of the mystery hidden for ages in God who created all things; that through the church the manifold wisdom of God might now be made known to the principalities and powers in the heavenly places. This was according to the eternal purpose which he has realized in Christ Jesus our Lord, in whom we have boldness and confidence of access through our faith in Him.

Most of us live our lives with far too little awareness of the stupendous realities around us. Most of us go through day after day and seldom feel the impact of the magnitude of what we are caught up in by belonging to Jesus Christ, the God-Man, the ruler of the universe. And we don't take enough time to meditate on how our jobs, our home life, our leisure, our church involvement--how each of these fits into the cosmic significance of the church. And consequently our lives often lack the flavor of eternity and the aroma of something ultimate. O, that there might be more people among us whose manner of life mirrors something mysterious and wonderful and whose words have a cosmic significance.

Jesus was like that. You could not be around Him long until you felt: "There is something peculiar about this man; I've never heard anybody speak like this man." He had the aroma of God about Him. Every part of His life was part of a cosmic plan, and He knew it and it made Him earnest. And the great apostle Paul was like this, too, as we see him here in this text. He saw his own little ministry as part of a cosmic plan and it filled him with seriousness and passion. And I pray, that God will open our eyes today so that we can see that all of us believers, each with his peculiar gift, are part of a cosmic mission given to the church

by the Creator.

That mission, or purpose, is stated in verse 10: "that through the church the manifold wisdom of God might now be made known to the principalities and powers in the heavenly places." The cosmic mission of the church is to display before the hosts of heaven the manifold wisdom of God. "You are the light of the world." But not merely that. You are the light of the cosmos, with the spectacular mission of revealing the wisdom of God to supernatural beings. Therein lies a tremendous incentive for being the church Christ created us to be. To understand our mission to the heavenly places we need to answer three questions: 1) Who are these principalities and powers? 2) What is the divine wisdom the church is to make known to them? 3) How are we to make it known?

1) Who are the principalities and powers? These two terms (literally, "rulers and antichrists") are found together in two other places in Ephesians. One is in 6:11,12, "Put on the whole armor of God, that you may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil. For we are not contending against flesh and blood but against the principalities, against the powers, against the world rulers of this present darkness, against the spiritual hosts of wickedness in the heavenly places."

Here the principalities and powers are clearly aligned with the devil. The most natural interpretation would seem to be that principalities and powers refer to supernatural beings in Satan's hosts. They are not mere flesh and blood; that is, they are not merely human. They are supernatural. And they are intent on man's destruction, which is why we need the "armor of God."

Before anyone writes this off as pre-scientific mythology, think again. Is it real evidence or is it just a pervasive mood of secularism that makes Satan and his hosts unpalatable to us modern folk? Have all our modern, scientific advances given us a handle on the evil forces in the world? Is not just the opposite the case: that the cosmic forces of evil manage to get a handle on every human invention and every human institution and corrupt them and turn them for destruction? Nuclear power becomes the basis of international braggadocio and mutual threats of national suicide. Multipurpose petroleum becomes the currency of international blackmail. Pain-relieving drugs become a multi-billion dollar market in life-destroying narcotics. Advances in obstetrical science serve to refine the technique of manslaughter through millions of abortions. Free enterprise degenerates into money-loving greed and exploitation of third world countries. And the grand institution of the university sinks into a Babel normlessness. Are we really so advanced that we can do without the Biblical doctrine of demons?

Paul said that the principalities and powers were "in the heavenly places" (3:10; 6:12). Literally this is simply "the heavens, the spheres above the earth. The word is used in Ephesians 1:3 where Paul says God has "blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places." And it is used in 1:20 where he says God "raised Christ from the dead and made him sit at his right hand in the heavenly places." It is the abode of God. I think that if we had asked Paul where this was he would have simply said, "Not on the earth, but far away, and therefore, up. That's the direction you go when you move away from the earth." But it is a pointless task, I think, to try to locate heaven, because God and all the angelic hosts both good and evil are spirits with no spatial dimensions. Paul knew this as well as we do and so by locating the principalities and powers in the "heavens" he is simply saying they are not earthly creatures, they come from afar, they inhabit another dimension, a dimension similar to God and his holy angels.

But while that is their native sphere of life they have tremendous influence on earth. All the examples I gave you assume that these principalities and powers manifest themselves in the attitudes, inventions,

and institutions of society. This is proved by Ephesians 2:1,2. The same pair of terms (principalities and powers) occurs in verse 2 but is translated in the RSV as prince of the power.

And you he made alive when you were dead through trespasses and sins in which you once walked following the course of this world, following the prince of the power of the air, the spirit that is now at work in the sons of disobedience.

This text shows that principalities and powers are at work in the sons of disobedience and that there is a "course of this world" which such people follow.

Therefore, the principalities and powers (of Ephesians 3:10) are supernatural hosts in league with Satan and have a cosmic influence on the course of this age, its people, inventions, and institutions. These are the beings to whom the church is to demonstrate the manifold wisdom of God.

2) Our second question on Ephesians 3:10 is: What is the divine wisdom the church is to make known to the principalities and powers? I think the best way to answer this question is to see what has in fact been made known to the church. We cannot display to others what has not been shown to us. There are three stages of revelation in Ephesians 3:1-10. First, Paul receives revelation from God (vv. 1-7). Second, the church receives revelation from Paul (vv. 8,9). Third, the church makes this known to the principalities and powers in the heavenly places (v. 10). Let's look at these three stages briefly to find out what the content of the revelation is in each case.

In verse 3 Paul says that "the mystery was made known to me by revelation." What is this mystery? In verse 4 it is called the "mystery of Christ." Then verse 5 tells us in what sense it is mysterious and verse 6 tells us just what the content of the secret is. It is mysterious (according to verse 5) in the sense that it was not made known to men before in the way that it has now been revealed to the apostles and prophets by the Spirit. So the secret (or mystery) is not a secret any more. The time has come for the secret to be told to the world. What is it? Verse 6: the revealed secret is that in Christ Jesus and through the gospel the gentiles are now to become fellow heirs (with Israel), members of the same body, and sharers in the same promise.

In the Old Testament times Israel was God's chosen people and He gave to them alone the unique benefits of His covenants, His law, His worship, His promises. He did say that through Israel the nations (i.e., gentiles) would be blessed (Genesis 12:3), but he did not spell out clearly in what sense or to what degree. And many in Israel did not catch on to the hints in the Old Testament that God intended to include all nations in the blessings promised to Israel. So when Christ came to accomplish just that many in Israel simply rejected him. But it is clear that Christ came for that purpose: Romans 15: 8,9 say, "Christ became a servant to the circumcised (i.e., Jews) to show God's truthfulness in order to confirm the promises given to the patriarchs, and in order that the gentiles might glorify God for His mercy." This is the mystery of Christ, the Messiah: contrary to most Jewish expectations He comes to save both Jew and gentile and to bind them both into one new people who together inherit the promises, This is the church.

Ephesians two spells out the mystery in detail. In verses 12-14 Paul says to the gentiles,

Remember that you were at that time separated from Christ, alienated from the commonwealth of Israel, and strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world. But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near in the blood of Christ. For he is our peace who has made us both (Jew and Gentile) one, and has broken down the dividing wall of hostility.

So the mystery of Christ is that in His death on the cross He purchased not just eternal life for individuals who trust him; he purchased and formed a new people, a church composed of Jews and gentiles who are both heirs of God's promises and beneficiaries of God's grace. That is the first stage of revelation: Paul receives the revelation of this mystery.

The second stage of revelation is that Paul preaches this good news to the nations. the gospel Paul preaches is the good news that the gentiles may become fellow-heirs of Israel's promise by simply trusting Christ. According to verses 8 and 9 Paul saw his task like this: "to preach to the gentiles the unsearchable riches of Christ, and to make all men see what is the plan of the mystery hidden for ages in God who created all things." When Paul communicates the mystery of Christ to the gentiles he has to put it in terms of riches - riches of grace. The essence of the mystery which he proclaims to us gentiles is this: since Christ is the one through whom we become heirs of all the promises made to God's people, therefore, there are unsearchable riches in Christ. The astounding mystery and gospel proclamation is that we gentiles can have all these riches through faith in Christ. According to Ephesians 2:7 the reason God rescued us from death and made us alive with Christ is "that in the coming ages he might show the immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus." The astonishing secret of God is that he sent his Messiah to die for sins and to rise again in order to create a church of Jews and gentiles on whom he could spend an eternity lavishing every possible blessing with all his infinite might.

And now that this has been made known to the gentiles (to us) and has begun to create that people (the church), the third stage of revelation happens in verse 10: "That through the church (this new unified people) the manifold wisdom of God be made known to the principalities and powers in the heavenly places." I take it then that the wisdom of God is primarily the wisdom it took to devise a plan of redemption as great as this: a plan to unite and glorify Jew and gentile, contrary to all human expectation, by the horrible death of the mighty Messiah. The wisdom of God is virtually the same as the mystery of Christ revealed to Paul. In 1 Corinthians 2:7 Paul says, "We speak the hidden wisdom of God in a mystery, which God foreordained before the ages for our glory." God's wisdom is the counsel of his will (Ephesians 1:11) by which he ordained from all eternity to glorify the church through the unthinkable death of his Son. In 1 Corinthians 1:23,24 Paul says, "We preach Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and folly to Gentiles, but to those who are called, but Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God." Christ crucified for the unification and glorification of Jews and gentiles in the church is the mystery of God and the wisdom of God.

3) That leaves us with one final question: How are we, the church, to make this wisdom known to the principalities and powers in the heavenly places? I don't think Paul means that the cosmic mission of the church is to inform the satanic hosts about the purpose of God in sending Christ to die for our unification and glorification. They know all too well what God wants. That's why they can oppose him so effectively. What the church is to do is demonstrate the wisdom in God's mysterious plan. The wisdom of a plan is seen by the fact that it works. We show the wisdom of God by showing in the church that it is working. The death of Christ was not in vain: it has reconciled us to God, it has broken down the wall of hostility between Jew and gentile and other races, it has produced one new body and it has given us the hope of his immeasurable kindness forever. We show the wisdom of God to the cosmic powers by living this way, by being the church Christ died to create.

Brothers and sisters in Christ, we have an incomparable calling. It stretches our imagination to the limit. This text is a summons to us to set our minds on things that are unseen, stupendous heavenly realities that have worldwide bearing on the course of this age. We don't usually hit targets that we are not aiming

at. And the target for the church is to demonstrate to the evil powers of the cosmos that God has been wise in sending his Son to die that we might have hope and be unified in one body, the church. Therefore, when we fail to live in hope and to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace we send this signal through the galaxies: God's purpose is failing; he was not wise, he was foolish.

I said last week that your gift, your God-given ability to disperse grace and strengthen faith, may seem small, but that as a part of God's eternal revelation of his glory it takes on stupendous proportions. Now we can see just how stupendous, for what's at stake is not merely being the light of the world but the light of the cosmos. The church is the cosmic showcase of God's mercy and if we fail to live as joyful beneficiaries of his mercy and fail to maintain the unity of the Spirit, we bring a cosmic reproach upon the wisdom of God.

My prayer this morning for all of us is that we might keep before ourselves this new incentive for walking worthily of our calling, in all lowliness and meekness, with patience, forbearing one another in love, eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. The new incentive is this: all the principalities and powers in the heavenly places are watching this week to see if we, the church, will live as if God is wise or as if he is foolish. Let's show them by the way we live that God's mysterious plan is not failing!

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