

God's Eternal Purpose

By Cornelius R. Stam

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What is the "eternal purpose" of God, spoken of in Ephesians 3:11? How is the "Body of Christ" related to it? Is the Messianic kingdom related to it in any way?

It is evident from the epistles of Paul that while there are many details to God's great plan for the universe, all revolves around one central, eternal purpose. It should be our sincere desire to understand that purpose and how we fit into it.

WHAT IT IS

In examining the Scriptures as to this important subject we should be careful to observe that God's eternal purpose concerns *Christ* first of all. "The Church which is His Body," is, of course, involved in it, but our Lord Himself stands at the center of the "eternal purpose." Eph. 1:9, 10 makes this abundantly clear. There the apostle describes "*the secret of His will...which He hath purposed in Himself:*

"THAT IN THE DISPENSATION OF THE FULNESS OF TIMES HE MIGHT GATHER TOGETHER IN ONE ALL THINGS IN CHRIST, BOTH WHICH ARE IN HEAVEN, AND WHICH ARE ON EARTH; EVEN IN HIM."

God's great plan for the future, then, is to unify all things in heaven and on earth in Christ; to center all in Him.

How much, in heaven and earth, is now *out* of center; alienated from God and His Christ. This included not only the majority of mankind, under their princes and potentates, but a great host of heavenly angels under the rulership of Satan, their "prince" (Eph. 2:2). Indeed, we believers wrestle "*against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this world, against wicked spirits in the heavenlies*" (Eph. 6:12).

This is only a temporary situation, however, for some day the heavens and the earth will be occupied only by those who love and adore Christ, including sinners reconciled to God through Christ. In Col. 1:20 the apostle tells us that "*having made peace through the blood of His cross,*" it pleased the Father "*BY HIM to reconcile all things unto Himself; BY HIM, I say, whether they be things in earth, or things in heaven.*" This agrees with his premise in Verse 19:

"FOR IT PLEASSED THE FATHER THAT IN HIM SHOULD ALL FULLNESS DWELL."

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In contemplating this glorious scene, however, it should be carefully noted that a reconciled heaven and earth does not spell *universal* reconciliation. The celestial and terrestrial are here included, but the *infernial* is carefully *excluded*. God has exalted His Son, indeed, “*that at the name of Jesus EVERY knee should bow,*” and this *subjugation* of all will include those “*in heaven, and...in earth, and...under the earth*” (Phil 2:10) but the *reconciled* throng will be found only in heaven and on earth.

HOW IT WAS CONCEIVED

The eternal purpose was conceived in the heart and mind of *God alone*, in eternity past. Concerning *our* part in it, the Apostle Paul writes to Timothy:

“Be not thou therefore ashamed of the testimony of our Lord, nor of me His prisoner: but be thou partaker of the afflictions of the gospel according to THE POWER OF GOD;

“WHO HATH SAVED US, AND CALLED US WITH AN HOLY CALLING, NOT ACCORDING TO OUR WORKS, BUT ACCORDING TO HIS OWN PURPOSE AND GRACE, WHICH WAS GIVEN US IN CHRIST JESUS BEFORE THE WORLD BEGAN” (II Tim. 1:8, 9).

How often, in the Pauline epistles, we find this emphasis upon the sovereignty of God! “All things are of God”; this is the very essence of grace. It is blessedly true that the election of believers was “according to the foreknowledge¹ of God” (I Pet. 1:2; Rom. 8:29) but we must not confuse His foreknowledge with the outworking of His sovereign purpose, as though He merely knew in advance who would be saved. Concerning the latter we read that “the purpose of God according to elections” will “stand not of works but of Him that calleth” (Rom. 9:11).

Perhaps no passage of Scripture emphasizes this with such definite clarity as Eph. 1:3-12. As we quote it below, note how such words as “will,” “counsel,” “pleasure,” “purpose,” “chosen,” “elect” and “predestinated” predominate.

“Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who hath blessed us with all spiritual blessings in heavenly places in Christ:

“According as He hath CHOSEN us in Him BEFORE THE FOUNDATION OF THE WORLD, that we should be holy and without blame before Him;

“In love² having PREDESTINATED us unto the adoption of sons by Jesus Christ to Himself, according to THE GOOD PLEASURE OF HIS WILL.

“To the praise of the glory of His grace, wherein HE HATH MADE US ACCEPTED in the beloved [One].

¹ Knowing all the factors involved, He could elect justly.

² We believe these two words belong with Verse 5. There is no punctuation in the original.

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“Having made known unto us the mystery of HIS WILL, according to HIS GOOD PLEASURE WHICH HE HATH PURPOSED IN HIMSELF:

“That in the dispensation of the fulness of times He might gather together in one all things in Christ, both which are in heaven, and which are on earth; even in Him:

“In whom also we have obtained an inheritance, being PREDESTINATED ACCORDING TO THE PURPOSE OF HIM WHO WORKETH ALL THINGS AFTER THE COUNSEL OF HIS OWN WILL:

“THAT WE SHOULD BE TO THE PRAISE OF HIS GLORY, WHO FIRST TRUSTED IN CHRIST.”

All that has so far been fulfilled of the will of God, as revealed in the Scriptures, should give believers complete confidence that His purposes will find their culmination in the open exaltation of Christ, not only as King of Israel and the world, but as the Head over *all*, with a reconciled heaven and earth finding their all in Him.

HOW IT WAS REVEALED

The means which God used to reveal His eternal purpose are wonderful to contemplate.

The long-promised King appears and is rejected. His forerunner is beheaded; He Himself is nailed to a cross. Those who testify of His resurrection from the dead are beaten and imprisoned, and Stephen is stoned to death. A great persecution is waged against the disciples of Christ with Saul of Tarsus as its flaming leader. He scourges believers in their synagogues to compel them to blaspheme Christ. He drags men *and women* to trial and execution for professing Christ—and all with “authority and commission” from the rulers.

The favored nation has proved itself no better than the Gentiles, whom God gave up centuries before, and, giving Israel up too, He now concludes them all in unbelief “*that He might have mercy upon all*” (Rom. 11:32).

But what about His promises regarding the kingdom? These He will fulfil in due time (Rom. 11:25-27) but first He must demonstrate that man needs Christ; is hopeless without Christ, whether Jew or Gentile; that in his utter depravity he must be saved by grace, through Christ's merits, or he will not be saved at all. Thus, setting the program of prophecy and the kingdom aside for a time, he sends an offer of reconciliation by free grace, through faith, to both Jews and Gentiles, on the basis of Christ's redemptive work at Calvary, and thus apart from sacrifices, circumcision or water baptism. And He does this—

“THAT HE MIGHT RECONCILE BOTH UNTO GOD IN ONE BODY BY THE CROSS, HAVING SLAIN THE ENMITY THEREBY” (Eph. 2:16).

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What more appropriate vessel could God have chosen to demonstrate and proclaim these “riches of His grace” than Saul of Tarsus, the former blasphemer and persecutor? Thus it is this Saul, now saved and appointed an apostle, to whom and through whom God now reveals the secret of His will concerning the reconciliation of Jews and Gentiles into one body in Christ—an earnest of the glorious future unity of all heaven and earth in Christ.

In short, God is now demonstrating in the Body of Christ, what will one day be experienced in all heaven and earth: that man's only hope is in *Christ* and that unity and blessing can be found only in Him.

The apostle writes of this in Eph. 3:1-11, a passage which we should ponder over prayerfully if we would see the relation of believers today to “the eternal purpose”:

“For this cause I Paul, the prisoner of Jesus Christ for you Gentiles,

“If ye have heard of THE DISPENSATION OF THE GRACE OF GOD which is given me to you-ward:

“How that BY REVELATION HE MADE KNOWN UNTO ME THE MYSTERY; (as I wrote afore in few words,

“Whereby, when ye read, ye may understand my knowledge in the mystery of Christ)

“WHICH IN OTHER AGES WAS NOT MADE KNOWN UNTO THE SONS OF MEN, as it is now revealed unto His holy apostles and prophets by the Spirit;

“THAT THEY WHO ARE OF THE NATIONS SHOULD BE JOINT HEIRS, AND A JOINT BODY, AND JOINT PARTAKERS OF HIS PROMISE IN CHRIST JESUS BY THE GLAD TIDINGS [New. Tr.]

“Whereof I was made a minister, according to the gift of the grace of God, given unto me by the effectual working of His power.

“UNTO ME, WHO AM LESS THAN THE LEAST OF ALL SAINTS, IS THIS GRACE GIVEN, THAT I SHOULD PREACH AMONG THE GENTILES THE UNSEARCHABLE RICHES OF CHRIST;

“And to make all men see what is THE FELLOWSHIP [DISPENSATION] OF THE MYSTERY, WHICH FROM THE BEGINNING OF THE WORLD HATH BEEN HID IN GOD, WHO CREATED ALL THINGS BY JESUS CHRIST.

“TO THE INTENT THAT NOW UNTO THE PRINCIPALITIES AND POWERS IN HEAVENLY PLACES MIGHT BE KNOWN BY THE CHURCH THE MANIFOLD WISDOM OF GOD.

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“ACCORDING TO THE ETERNAL PURPOSE WHICH HE PURPOSED IN CHRIST JESUS OUR LORD.”

This is how God revealed, and now demonstrates, His eternal purpose to gather all in heaven and earth together in one in Christ. Blessed revelation! Joyful anticipation! Glorious consummation!

MEANTIME

As God now conducts this divine demonstration of His eternal purpose, we believers may enjoy a threefold blessing.

1. We may rejoice that we have been **“PREDESTINATED ACCORDING TO THE PURPOSE OF HIM WHO WORKETH ALL THINGS AFTER THE COUNSEL OF HIS OWN WILL.”** Read II Tim. 1:9 and Eph. 1:1-12 again, thoughtfully, and see how blessedly and eternally secure is the simplest believer in the Lord Jesus Christ.
2. We may rejoice that, whatever the circumstances, **“ALL THINGS WORK TOGETHER [Lit., ARE BEING WORKED TOGETHER] FOR GOOD, TO THEM THAT LOVE GOD, TO THEM WHO ARE THE CALLED ACCORDING TO HIS PURPOSE”** (Rom. 8:28).
3. We may rejoice in the reality and practice of our oneness in Christ, **“ENDEAVORING TO KEEP³ THE UNITY OF THE SPIRIT IN THE BOND OF PEACE...TILL WE ALL COME IN THE UNITY OF THE FAITH, AND OF THE KNOWLEDGE OF THE SON OF GOD, UNTO A PERFECT MAN, UNTO THE MEASURE OF THE STATURE OF THE FULLNESS OF CHRIST”** (Eph. 4:3-13).

³ Experientially.