

Chapter Eight

The One Big Plan of God

Purpose: The purpose of this teaching is: (1) to instil the idea that the one God has only one plan; (2) that this one plan is centred on his one Son; (3) that the one plan to be realized through his one Son is the establishment of one Kingdom; and (4) that God's plans for everything else in creation including his plans for you and me find their proper place and meaning within the one big plan. This teaching also reinforces the earlier teachings about the goal of the coming glory. Our God is a purposeful God and everything is moving towards the Omega point of the coming of the Lord at the end of the age.

Presentation: This teaching is fundamental for the whole series. In effect the gift of the Holy Spirit opens our eyes and hearts to God's one plan and equips us to play our particular role. The surprises of the Holy Spirit open eyes and hearts to how through the Holy Spirit the Lord is moving the whole body of Christ towards the fulfilment and realization of the one plan. Then this teaching prepares for the teaching on the call of Israel, which is a key element in the unfolding of this plan. It is helpful, before or after this teaching, to invite a sharing on the impact on a young Christian's life when he/she understood that there is only one plan of God and that we have a place in it.

The Mystery of Christ

There is one word used in the Scriptures to describe God's one plan. It is the word "mystery" (*Μυστήριον*), which is rightly described as "the mystery of Christ" (Eph. 3: 4). The cosmic scope of this plan is outlined by Paul in Eph. 1: 3 - 10. It is "the mystery of his will, according to his purpose which he set forth in Christ as a plan for the fullness of time, to unite all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth." (Eph. 1: 9 - 10).

From the various uses that the apostle Paul makes of this term, we can put together the following characteristics of this mystery:

- It is the plan of God from before creation and from the beginning (Eph. 1: 4 - 9);
- It was kept hidden for long ages from previous generations (Rom. 16: 25; Eph. 3: 5, 9; Col. 1: 26);
- It is now made manifest in the coming of Jesus Christ in human flesh (1 Tim. 3: 16);
- It is centred on the person of Jesus Christ (Eph. 3: 4; Col. 1: 27; 2: 3);
- It is inwardly revealed by the Holy Spirit (1 Cor. 2: 10; Eph. 3: 5);
- It is revealed to the apostles and prophets (Eph. 3: 5) and to "his saints" (Col. 1: 26).

From several of these passages we can see the close connection between the mystery and what is described in another characteristically Pauline term, the fullness (*πλήρωμα*). What the fullness means can be grasped more clearly when we look at what the mystery of Christ entails, what it is that the Holy Spirit is revealing to the church and to the Christian in and through Jesus Christ. Looking at these various texts that speak of "mystery", we can identify the following elements:

- The inclusion of the Gentiles with the Jews in God's plan of salvation (Eph. 3: 6);
- The way in which Jewish unbelief opened the door for the nations (Rom. 11: 25 - 26);
- The message of the gospel (Eph. 6: 19);
- The indwelling of Christ in us, which is our hope of future glory (Col. 1: 27);
- The nuptial union of Jesus Christ, the bridegroom, and the church, his body (Eph. 5: 32);
- Our resurrection on the last day (1 Cor. 15: 51);
- The person of Jesus himself, in whom are hid all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge" (Col. 2: 2 - 3);
- The uniting of everything created both in heaven and on earth (Eph. 1: 10).

From this vast richness we can catch some glimpses of what the fullness means:

- The fullness of God that dwells in Jesus bodily (Col. 2: 9);
- The fullness of Jesus and his body (Eph. 1: 22 - 23);
- The fullness of Christ (Eph. 4: 13);
- The fullness of Israel (Rom. 11: 12);
- The fullness of the Gentiles (Rom. 11: 25);
- The fullness of time (Eph. 1: 10).

These different dimensions of fullness all fit together: the fullness of God in Jesus leading to a fullness of Israel and of the Gentiles that will form the fullness of the church in the fullness of time. The overall vision is especially developed in the letter to the Ephesians. It is the vision of Jews and Gentiles being brought together upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets to form one holy dwelling place of the Lord in the Spirit (Eph. 2: 19 - 22). It is the vision of all the saints being equipped to build up the body of Christ so that all grow together in the knowledge of the Son of God reaching maturity as all are knit together and build up the one body in love (Eph. 4: 11 - 16). But this plan also has a cosmic dimension, as Eph. 1: 10 indicated (all things not just all angels and humans). This dimension is wonderfully expressed in Rom. 8: 18 - 25, where the apostle speaks of the whole creation waiting with eager longing for the revealing of the sons of God. The plan of God is about fullness: the fullness of the realization of God's purposes, the fullness of creation, the fullness of deliverance and salvation, the fullness of the kingdom, the fullness of Christ.

The teaching and priorities of Jesus himself

The gospels give us glimpses of the way Jesus himself thought about God's one plan and his place within it. It is especially as the opposition to Jesus builds up and his passion approaches that Jesus focuses much more on his coming in glory and on the final judgment. But even before that there are some revealing statements of the Lord. So Jesus speaks of "the age to come": "And whoever says a word against the Son of man will

be forgiven; but whoever speaks against the Holy Spirit will not be forgiven, either in this world or the next.” (Matt. 12: 32). The parables of the kingdom in Matthew 13 speak of the final fruits and of the judgment. “Just as the weeds are gathered and burned with fire, so will it be at the close of the age.” (Matt. 13: 40; see also v. 49). The role of the Son of man is further developed. Then Jesus answers objections from the Sadducees about the resurrection of the body, saying: “For in the resurrection, they neither marry nor are given in marriage, but are like angels in heaven.” (Matt. 22: 30). The parable of the talents speaks of “a nobleman” who “went into a far country to receive a kingdom and then return” (‘ Luke 19: 12), a clear reference to himself that Jesus gives to correct the impression that “the kingdom of God was to appear immediately” (Luke 19: 11). One of the clearest references to the understanding of Jesus concerning His father’s plan comes in a tableau on the judgment: “Then the King will say to those at his right hand, ‘Come, O blessed of my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world.’” (Matt. 25: 34). After the resurrection, we are told that Jesus appeared to the eleven during forty days “speaking of the kingdom of God.” (Acts 1: 3).

God’s Plan for Our Lives

Often zealous young Christians are told “God has a plan for your life”. This is true, but we cannot think that God has millions of plans, one for each individual Christian throughout the centuries. We have to approach this question “What is God’s plan for my life?” within the framework of God’s one big plan. It means that God is giving you and me a place in His one big plan. It means that God’s plan for you and for me means “what is our place and role within the Body of Christ?”. It means that God’s plan for you and for me concerns how you and I fit into God’s plan for the fullness to come, how we fit into the preparation of the Holy Spirit for the coming Kingdom.

This perspective of God’s one plan protects us from a self-centred search just for my role, my place, without reference to the big picture, without reference to other people. It also protects me from thinking that I can work out my role and my place on my own without the input and discernment of others. When we develop a real understanding for God’s one big plan in His Son, then a big expansion takes place in our minds and in our spirits. It is not just that we think “big stage” and not “small stage”, but that the huge variety in the different ways that we can serve the Lord and His one plan open up to us. The possibilities are far more numerous than we ever imagined before. This is because our opening up to the scope of God’s one big plan expands our thinking beyond our own small world and our limited experience of church.

In fact, it is much more exciting and fulfilling to know that I have a role in God’s overall purpose. It gives my role and calling a much greater dignity. It roots my understanding in the church as the body of Christ, it recognizes my need for teaching and my need to be under authority. Sometimes we are very poor judges of our own real talents and skills, not to speak of our limitations and weaknesses. So how can we begin the process of discovering what my calling is and what my place is in the body?

Discovering God’s plan for me

Although it is natural to want to know God’s purpose for us, we should not expect always to discover this quickly. We must not impose time-tables on the Lord as though He has to show me by the end of this year or by some specific date. That is a sign of impatience, not of faith. Often young Christians - and sometimes not so young Christians - have to wait. Often we have to go through further experiences of life, meet people we haven’t yet met, complete our education, or go through some trial or test, before God is ready to show us.

It is as though God says, “I am still putting together the pieces for you”, and so we have to wait until all the elements are there.

The surest signs of God’s call are often revealed in our deepest yearnings and desires. But we have to test our desires and our enthusiasms. We have to learn to distinguish between surface desires and deep longings of the heart. The former will come and go. My enthusiasms tomorrow may be different from my enthusiasms of today. But the deepest desires of the heart do not come and go like that. In fact, they tend to deepen with time, especially as we allow them expression in prayer.

We also need to distinguish between our particular giftings and the talents we have. Our particular giftings are a stronger sign of our calling. While talents will be useful in whatever call we receive, they are less of an indicator concerning calling. Sometimes the Lord asks people to sacrifice some talent or maybe to shelve it for the moment, all in the service of something much higher. But it is not helpful to adopt a mentality that whatever I am attracted to, God will want me to give it up!

We also need to discern our calling in the church context. Two factors can be important here. First, it is important to find a spiritual adviser of experience whom we can trust. This may be a community leader or it may be someone else, for example, a wise and experienced priest. Second, we should ask others who know us well how they see our gifts and our service within the body. If we are part of a committed community or other Christian group, those who know us well there will usually have a good perception of my abilities, my consistency and how realistic my hopes are.

In whatever direction we are led, and as the Lord seems to show us the way and indicate our place, times of testing are needed. It is not wise to jump to certain conclusions too fast. But when we are seeking wise advice, the Lord will lead us and we can be confident that He is in the process of showing us our place and our call within His one big plan.

Finally, a personal sharing. I only discovered my full calling at the age of 63. The great pioneer of Christian unity, the Abbe Paul Couturier, only discovered that calling when he had passed the age of 50. In my case, what I thought earlier was my calling ended up being seen as contributory factors, elements in the bigger calling the Lord was later to make clear. From this history, I could see clearly how different phases of my life in very different situations were all in the end building blocks in God’s purpose for me in His service. So it may happen for you. What you now think is definitively your calling may end up as a necessary factor in something bigger and more wonderful. Praise the Lord!

Points for Discussion

1. How much have you thought about God’s plan for your life?
2. How do you see Jesus Christ as the centre and agent of God’s one plan?
3. How do you understand the role of the Holy Spirit in all this?