

**Ephesians**  
**God's Great Secret (Part 3)**

**Ephesians 3:1-13**

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Well, it's our joy this morning to turn again to Ephesians 3 and I invite you to turn there with me as we begin--as we continue our study of God's great secret. Yesterday I stopped to get some gas for my car (what has now become a painful experience for us all) and as I was standing there watching my life's savings pour into that gas tank, there was a little sticker on the pump that brought me a little bit of humor in the middle of what was otherwise a very unpleasant situation. Affixed to the pump was a little paper sticker that read "includes up to 10% ethanol". Now, that may not on the surface seem very humorous, but it was to me.

If you've seen the news lately, you know that this additive has become a kind of political flashpoint. Ethanol, by law, has been added to our gasoline in a well-intentioned effort to reduce our dependence on foreign oil. But ethanol is made from corn. The problem is that as more corn has been diverted for the use of ethanol in our gas tanks, the price of corn has risen because of the lack of supply, raising the cost of food and even creating a world-wide shortage of corn to eat. So, what seemed to somebody like a good idea at the time has now become a major issue. It has congress scrambling, wondering what they're going to do about this problem. It's called unintended consequences. You had a plan to do one thing, but unintentionally, as you carry out that plan, you create a second problem even as you're solving the first.

I had to smile at that because that's how it is with our plans, isn't it--the plans of human beings. We tend to do that. Most of the plans we human beings make are accompanied by unintended consequences. Results that we didn't plan on and do not want. But thank God, that's not true of God's plans.

Today we come to the results of God's great eternal secret plan. And the results that God's plan produces are exactly as He planned them to be. And they are all absolutely wonderful. And it's our joy to look at them together this morning. For the last two weeks we've been studying the first half of Ephesians 3. We've discovered that this really is a one-sentence digression.

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Beginning in verse 2 of chapter 3 and running all the way down through verse 13 is a long interruption. In verse 1 Paul begins to pray for the Ephesian believers, and he mentions that he is a prisoner of Christ for their sakes. As he mentions that, it reminds him that he is, in fact, about the Gentiles. His ministry is for the Gentiles. And as he thinks of that, he interrupts himself for 12 verses. And in this 12-verse interruption, before Paul gets back to his prayer down in verse 14, in this interruption, he refers several times to God's mystery, God's mystery. Now if you haven't been here for our study so far, let me tell you that as you look at that word in the Bible, you have to get every semblance of the English definition out of your mind, because it has nothing to do with our English word. Although originally our English word came from this Greek word. The Greek word is *mysterion*—or *musterion* actually.

In biblical terms a mystery is a divine secret. A divine secret that was at one time known only to God and would never have been discovered. But a secret that God has now made known to us through the Scripture. That's a mystery. So, it is a secret in the past tense. When you read the word mystery, it's no longer a secret. It's no longer a mystery. It's been fully revealed to us by God. But it's something that at one time only God knew, and now He's made known. That's the theme of this interruption that Paul has in verses 2 - 13 of Ephesians 3. We're working our way through this passage by allowing Paul to answer a series of questions about this mystery or this secret that God had.

Let me briefly review what we've already seen together as we've worked our way through this passage. In verses 2 - 4, Paul answers the question, to whom did God reveal His secret? And the quick answer is Paul, but then Paul goes on to explain that it wasn't just for his sake, but it was for the Ephesian believers' sake, and ultimately it was for our sakes as well. God intended to make His secret known to all of us. That was God's intention.

In verse 5, Paul answers the question when did God reveal His secret. And the short answer to that question is, in the first century. Through the ministry and life of Jesus Christ, and especially through the revelation given to His apostles and prophets in the New Testament era that is recorded for us on the pages of the New Testament. God gave us, in the New Testament, His secret revealed. So, the first century would be the answer to when.

The third question is what is God's secret? What is God's secret? And in verse 4 Paul tells us what the secret or mystery is. He writes "the mystery of Christ". That is, the mystery that is the Messiah. Christ Himself is the mystery, or we could put it like this. God's secret is a person, Jesus Christ. And that secret is multi-faceted, and multi-dimensional, because what Christ does is multi-dimensional. And so, in verse 6, Paul explains one dimension of the mystery that is Christ, and that is, in Christ, He brings together believers from different backgrounds, Jew and Gentile, into one new entity called the church.

Verses 7 - 9 answer the fourth question, as we flow through this passage, and that is, how did God broadcast His secret to the world? How did God make known His secret? And the answer, found in those verses is through a specially chosen man, the apostle Paul.

We ended our study last time by answering a fifth question—found in verses 10 and 11, the answer is. And the question is why did God reveal His secret? Why did God reveal His secret? You see, God had a plan that Paul calls, in verse 11, the eternal purpose. Literally translated, God had a plan for the ages. That's what the Greek text says. God had a plan for the ages. And God chose to make that known to us. At the very epicenter of His plan was Christ Himself, and the exaltation of Jesus Christ. But God planned to do that, to exalt His Son, through a new community of redeemed believers called the church. The church is the theater in which God is putting His wisdom on display. Not just for us to see, but for other human beings to see. But beyond that, even, and especially, he says in verses 10 and 11, for angelic beings—powerful, awe-inspiring angelic beings, both holy and demonic, to see the wisdom of God. That's what God was doing. That's why God's made His secret known. So, His wisdom can be seen in the church.

Today, we come to the last two verses of Paul's digression about God's secret. And in these two verses, he answers this question: What are the results of the secret? What are the results of God's great eternal secret being revealed? Look at verses excuse me, verses 12 and 13. Ephesians 3:12 and 13, "in whom, [that is, in Christ Jesus our Lord] we have boldness and confident access through faith in Him. Therefore I ask you not to lose heart in my tribulations on

your behalf for they are for your glory.” In verses 10 and 11 we learned about the purpose for which God revealed His secret, but in verses 12 - 13, we find the practical ramifications—the implications, the application, or we could say the results of God’s revealing His secret.

In these two verses, Paul either clearly states or implies four practical results of God’s making His secret known to us. Four eminently practical results for our Christian lives. Because we now know God’s great secret, these results are a reality for us. If you’re here this morning, and you’re a follower of Jesus Christ, if you’ve reached the point where you have repented of your sins and you have believed in Him and Him alone as your only hope of heaven, then these results are for you.

The first wonderful result is this: we have the privilege of free speech before God. We have the privilege of free speech before God. Verse 12, “in whom [that is in Christ] we have boldness” The Greek word translated boldness here means confidence. But a special kind of confidence. It’s confidence in what we say, confidence in speaking. A few New Testament references I think will help you understand this and how it’s used. In Mark 8:32 we’re told that Jesus spoke “plainly”. It’s this Greek word. He spoke plainly. In John 7: 13 we’re told that Jesus spoke “openly”. Same Greek word. But let me take you to one passage that I think makes it very clear.

Turn to John 16, John 16. In the upper room discourse, the night before His crucifixion, this word is used a couple of times. And it really helps us understand the context in Ephesians. John 16:25. Jesus says to His disciples that night “these things I have spoken to you in figurative language” literally, in proverbs or in figures of speech. I haven’t spoke clearly or plainly. “but an hour is coming when I will no longer speak to you in figurative language, but will tell you [here’s our word] plainly of the Father.” Now notice verse 29, the word appears again. “His disciples said, Lo, now You are speaking plainly and are not using a figure of speech.” That’s our word—to speak plainly, to speak openly. That’s how the word is used in the New Testament.

In this case the etymology of this word helps us as well. Now, it’s dangerous to look at the etymology of a word and shape its meaning from that because words change in meaning over

time. So, the root will often lead you astray. But in this case, it doesn't. It sort of fills out our understanding a little bit. This word that's translated "boldness" in verse 12 of Ephesians 3 was originally used by those arguing for free speech in Athens—the ancient city of Athens. A citizen of Athens, they argued, should have the right to speak freely without fear of reprisals by those in authority. They essentially used it in the same way we use the term "free speech".

But the primary picture behind this word in the times of the New Testament didn't have to do with freedom of political expression. It had to do with being able to speak freely in the presence of your king—your earthly king, your earthly sovereign, the national king over your country. In the ancient world a king's personal authority often trumped the rule of law. So, the king could decide on a whim whether you lived or whether you died. With that in mind, when you came before a king, you were very careful in what you said. You didn't speak freely to the king. You guarded your words and sometimes you were even tempted to be, what? dishonest. We've all heard the story of the emperor's new clothes where all of the—all of the people around the emperor are telling him his new wardrobe, which in fact doesn't exist--so he's walking round naked—they're all telling him his new wardrobe is beautiful. They love his new clothes. Why? Because they're afraid. They understand that to speak the truth, to speak freely, is to risk the wrath of the king, the emperor.

But there were always a few people around any monarch, who by virtue of their position or their loyal service or their wealth, had the privilege of speaking their minds freely. Now, obviously, he was still the king, so they did it with respect, but there was a freedom of expression to say what they were thinking and what they were feeling. You see the picture behind this New Testament word? In the same way, Paul is arguing that because of God's great secret, the person of Jesus Christ, and because of His bringing together Jew and Gentiles into this new community called the church, we all now have the privilege of speaking freely before our king. We don't have to fear an outbreak of His wrath. We don't have to fear His changing whim, in which we're banished from His presence.

What does this practically look like? What does it mean to say that we can speak freely before God? Well, right now, in the present time, it means we can speak freely before God in prayer.

Again, respectful (he's still the king of the universe) but we can speak freely, openly, without fear of reprisal. Without fear of wrath or judgment. Let me show this to you. This word is used this way of prayer—approaching God in prayer—a number of times in the New Testament. Turn to Hebrews 4. This is what Paul is saying we have. We have free speech before our king. In Hebrews 4 the writer of Hebrews puts it like this. He's been saying we have this high priest who – who can sympathize with us because He's been tempted in all things as we are yet without sin.

Verse 16, “Therefore let us draw near [he's talking about figuratively drawing near—talking about prayer now, let us draw near] with [here's our word] confidence.” Same word translated boldness back in Ephesians 3. Let us draw near with free speech “to the throne of grace so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need.” We can come and freely speak of our needs. Read the Psalms. That's what David was describing, the reality of freely approaching God. In His case he was looking forward to the secret, Christ coming and being revealed. In our case, we're looking back, but he was approaching God with a sense of freedom of expression.

Turn over to Hebrews 10, you see it again. Hebrews 10:19. After the writer of Hebrews has described Christ as the perfect sacrifice, he says in verse 19, “Therefore, brethren, since we have confidence [boldness to speak] to enter the holy place by the blood of Jesus” Verse 22, “... let us draw near ...” There again, he's talking about prayer. Drawing near to God in prayer at this point. Over in John's first letter 1 John 3 you see this same usage of the word. “Beloved, if our heart does not condemn us, we have [boldness to speak] confidence before God; and whatever we ask we receive from Him, because we keep His commandments and do the things that are pleasing in His sight.”

This isn't a promise of a carte blanche, whatever you ask God gives you. As we'll see in a moment, that's qualified by praying in accordance with His will. He's simply making the point that we can speak freely and make our requests known before our king. In 1 John 5:14, John comes back to this theme. He says, “This is the [the boldness to speak] which we have before Him, that, if we ask anything according to His will, He hears us.” So folks, think of this. Paul is saying that if you're a believer in Jesus Christ, because the secret has been revealed, because Jesus has done what He's done, you and I can speak freely before our king in prayer. We don't

have to guard our words or hide the true feelings of our heart. We can express ourselves openly before our king.

But in the future, this takes on a different look and feel. In the future we will have the privilege of speaking freely not in prayer, but of speaking freely in God's actual presence. In His literal presence. In fact, stay here in 1 John and look at chapter 2. First John 2:28. Paul uses—or excuse me—John uses this word the same way here in verse 28 but he uses it in the future. “Now, little children, abide in Him,” that’s talking about persevering—continue to remain in Christ—abide—persevere “so that when He appears, we may have [boldness to speak] and not shrink away from Him in shame at His coming.” Same Greek word translated confidence here, as boldness in Ephesians 3. When Jesus comes, when we literally stand before Jesus Christ. Because of what He has done, we don’t have to shrink away in terror, but we can speak freely in His presence. In spite of His majesty, in spite of His glory, in spite of the awe of seeing the God of the universe, we will be able to speak boldly in His presence.

In 4:17 John uses it again. He says, “By this, love is perfected with us, so that we may have confidence in the day of judgment, because as He is, so also are we in this world.” We can have boldness to speak on the day of judgment—not because of us, but because we will be able to say, Father, I’m here not because I deserve to be here. I’m here in the righteousness of Christ. Receive me for His sake. Freeness and boldness to speak in the presence of the God of the universe. Do you really believe that? Do you believe that on the day of judgment, if you’re in Christ, you won’t have to shrink away in abject terror? But instead, because of Christ, you have free speech before God.

There’s a second great result of the revelation of God’s secret. Not only do we have free speech before God, the privilege of free speech before God, but secondly, we have the privilege of free access to God. Verse 12 again, “in whom we have boldness and confident access”. Now we’ve already seen this word ‘access’ back in Ephesians 2:18. It’s says through Jesus we both, that is Jew and Gentile, have our access to the Father. In other words, it describes the right to enter the presence of the Father. We have access. Here, Paul adds confident access. The Greek word essentially means the same thing as our English word “confident”. It means to be fully assured.

To have no uncertainty about what we're doing. We have confident access. We have the right to enter the presence of God and there's no uncertainty. We're fully assured that we have such a right because of what Christ has done.

When I was in seminary, I, for four months, traveled with a brass ensemble. Notice I did not say I played in a brass ensemble. I said I traveled with a brass ensemble. I was the leader of the group and the preacher. We were in a different church every day for four months, and two different ones on Sunday. That's where I cut my teeth preaching. All those people were forced (they were sort of the guinea pigs)forced to listen to me for all those months.

One of the men that traveled with me in our group had an acquaintance who at the time was head of the General Services Administration of the Reagan White House. And he arranged for all of us who were a part of this group to get a private evening tour of the White House, including a brief look in the oval office. Now I could try to make it sound very impressive. The truth is, Mrs. Reagan was up in her room and the President was away. Why did it happen like that? Because I had no access. I had no access to the President, much less confident access.

But you and I, as children of God, Paul says, have confident, free access into God's throne room, into His presence. Again, he means in prayer now. We have access to God in prayer at this point, and in the future, we will have actual physical access into the literal presence of God. What an incredible reality. You and I will see the face of God. We will have access into the presence of the God of the universe. And today, we have it in prayer.

Where do these two great privileges come from? Why do we now have the privilege of speaking freely to our King, and of free access into His presence. Well, in verse 12, Paul gives us two reasons. At the beginning of verse 12 he says, "in whom". That's a reference back to the end of verse 11, our Lord Jesus Christ, or Christ Jesus our Lord. In other words, we have these privileges in Christ because of our connection to Christ. Through the objective work of Jesus Christ our Lord, these privileges are ours. Because He lived as our substitute and because He died as our substitute, we have free speech and free access. The second reason is at the end of verse 12. "through faith in Him", through our faith in Christ. These two great privileges are

ours, not because we deserve them, because we've earned them, because they're our right, because we're worthy of them. They are ours solely on the basis of faith alone in Christ alone.

Do you understand this morning that you will never have the right to approach the God of the universe on your own merits, because of your own goodness? That your only hope is to be granted access through the merits of another? If you have any hope of accessing the God of the universe, you must put your entire hope of ever standing in His presence on the life and death of His Son, our Lord Jesus Christ, as your substitute. And for those who have, we have the privilege of free and open access into God's presence.

There's a third practical result of knowing God's great secret. We have the assurance of purpose in our trials. We have the assurance of purpose in our trials. Look at verse 13. Paul writes "Therefore I ask you not to lose heart at my tribulations on your behalf, for they are your glory". By "therefore", as he begins the verse, Paul means in light of what I've just shared with you about this plan of God's. You know that I'm a prisoner in Rome because of my ministry to you Gentiles. And that could be a source of discouragement to you. But I'm asking you not to be discouraged. Don't lose heart. Don't be discouraged at my tribulations.

Now the word "tribulation" here is a broad Greek word. It's a general word for external pressure. There are a lot of different things in our lives that can create pressure. Paul uses that word here, and in this context, clearly, it's a reference to his being under house arrest in Rome. For us it can be different things. And the external pressure that Paul was suffering was on their behalf. And he says, don't be discouraged about it. Now, why should they not be discouraged? I mean, after all, their spiritual father has been arrested. He has by this time spent somewhere between two and three years in jail.

Why shouldn't they be discouraged? Well, Paul tells them. Look at verse 13. "for [because] my tribulations [my external pressures, my imprisonment] ... [is for] your glory." What's happening to me in the flow of my ministry, will eventually bring you heavenly glory. You see, Paul wants them to know that his being in prison because of his ministry to the Gentiles was part of God's great plan. And it was therefore for their good. They shouldn't be discouraged by what appears

to be a setback. Because, like Paul understood, they need to understand that this is part of God's great plan of the ages, to put Himself on display. That's how Paul looked at his troubles.

Folks, this is a profound reminder from the life of Paul. Listen carefully. God's plan does not always involve external prosperity and success. Think about Paul for a moment. He was hand picked by Jesus Christ to be the apostle to the Gentiles—to play a crucial role in God's great secret plan of the ages. Hand picked! And yet, that plan included some very difficult things for the apostle Paul. Turn back to 2 Corinthians 11. Listen to what God's perfect eternal plan for Paul included. Second Corinthians 11, the middle of verse 23, it meant,

far more labors, far more imprisonments, beaten times without number, often in danger of death. Five times I received from the Jews thirty-nine *lashes*, three times I was beaten [by the Romans] with rods. [This is where sticks were tied together in a bundle and the Romans would beat their prisoners with them.] ... once I was stoned, three times I was shipwrecked, [By the way, Paul writes this before the shipwreck account in Acts, so that's number four.] a night and a day I have spent in the deep. [One of the shipwrecks was such that he was out in the ocean and had to float on wreckage for a day and night until he was rescued.] *I've* ... been on frequent journeys, in dangers from rivers, dangers from robbers, dangers from *my* [own] countrymen, dangers from the Gentiles, dangers in the city, dangers in the wilderness, dangers on the sea, dangers among false brethren. *I've* ... been in labor and hardship, through many sleepless nights, in hunger and thirst, often without food, in cold and exposure. [and] Apart from *such* external things, there is the daily pressure on me *of* concern for all the churches.

Folks, listen, that is a far cry from experiencing your best life now. Do you understand that Paul was hand picked by Jesus Christ to be His great apostle, to be a key component of His great eternal plan? And yet, for Paul, that included hardship and difficulty and trial and trouble and suffering.

And if that's not enough to challenge your thinking, go beyond Paul to Jesus Christ. The Son of God, the eternal Son of the living God, He is at the very center of God's plan of the ages. And yet, God's plan for Christ also included suffering and difficulty, and in His case, betrayal and hardship. Look at Hebrews 5. Here the writer of Hebrews describes what Jesus encountered in His earthly life. Hebrews 5:7. As he talks about Him as a high priest able to sympathize with us, he says in verse 7

In the days of His flesh, [that is during His earthly life] He offered up both prayers and supplications with loud crying and tears to the One able to save Him from death, and He was heard because of His piety, Although he was a Son, He learned obedience from the things which He suffered.

Jesus Christ didn't need to learn obedience because He was disobedient. He wanted to learn obedience because He wanted to be the model and pattern for us to follow. And so, in His humanity, He learned obedience, and He learned it through the path of suffering of various kinds. This was part of God's plan for Christ. Folks, this is diametrically opposed to the health, wealth, and prosperity teachers who will tell you that your best life is now, and they mean a life of external success and health and wealth and prosperity.

No, God's great plan of the ages included some very difficult times for His Son, for His apostles, for individual Christians in the New Testament era, and folks, I hate to tell you this, but for us as well. Solomon says that being human means experiencing trouble and trials. He put it like this. He said man is born for trouble as the sparks fly upward. As surely as the sparks of a fire float upward, even in the same way, it's guaranteed that if you're human, you will experience trouble and trials and pressures and difficulty and hard times.

That's the bad news, but here's the good news. The good news is that just like with Paul, because you and I are part of the church, we too are part of God's eternal plan. We don't play the role Paul played in God's great eternal plan, but we're part of that plan. We're part of the church on which God is putting His glory on display. And God intends to use the difficulties and troubles and trials that come into our lives for our good. Romans 8:28 is still in the Bible even

though it's often used tritely. It's still true that God is weaving together all of the experiences of our lives. For those who love Him, who are called according to that eternal plan, He's weaving together the events of our lives for our good and His glory. I don't know what you're facing this morning, what trouble and trial you're enduring in life, but I can tell you this. One of the great outcomes of the revelation of God's eternal secret is just like with Paul we can realize, listen, this is all part of the plan. And God means it for good.

He's putting His glory and His wisdom on display in the church, and that includes in my life. I'm not promised a life of ease and health and wealth and prosperity. But I am promised that God will put Himself on display in my life, even through my troubles, as He did with Paul and as He did with His Son. So, with the revealing of God's great secret, there are several practical, life-changing results. You and I have the privilege of free speech before God. We have the privilege of free access to God. And we have the assurance of purpose in our trials. They are all part of that great plan that God intends for our good.

But there's one more practical result. And I know you're thinking, how's he going to get another one when he's covered all of verse 13? There's one more practical result that permeates this entire passage. It screams in every line. It shouts through every word.

The fourth and final result of knowing God's secret is this. We have the responsibility of the church as our great priority. We have the responsibility of the church as our great priority. Now, think back for a moment about what Paul has said about the church in this passage. He has made two sweeping assertions about the church.

Number one. He has said in verses 10 and 11 that the church is at the center of God's plan of the ages, along with Christ.

And number two. He has said in verse 10 that the church is the primary stage on which God is putting His glory on display in the world. That makes the church pretty important doesn't it? Look down at 3:21. We'll get to this verse. This is where -the prayer of all Paul has taught sort of flows out in prayer to God. Look at what he says in verse 20. We quote this verse often.

[Now] to Him who is able to do far more abundantly beyond all that we ask or think, according to the power that works within us, to Him *be* the glory ... [How does God get glory in the world?] ... in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations forever and ever. Amen.

So, Paul says the church is pretty important. I mean, those are two big assertions. The church, the center of God's plan of the ages. The church, God's primary stage in the world for displaying His glory.

But let me back up from this paragraph and take a slightly broader view of what Paul is saying about the place and priority of the church in this letter. Let me briefly take you just through this letter and show you the other assertions that Paul adds about the priority of the church. We've seen two right here. Let me give you a few more. And I'm going to run through them very quickly.

Number three. The church is Christ's current pre-occupation. It's Christ's current pre-occupation. Ephesians 1:22, [God] ... gave ... [Christ] as head over all things to the church." Christ is ruling in His church. It's His pre-occupation. He's involved in everything.

Number four. The church is the only entity on earth that is under the immediate loving leadership of Christ. The only organization on earth that Christ shows immediate leadership over. Ephesians 5:23, ... "Christ ... is the head of the church ... [in the same way that a] husband *is* the head of the wife...."

Number five. The church is the supreme object of Christ's love. Ephesians 5:25. ... "Christ loved the church...."

Number six. The church was the purpose behind the death of Jesus Christ. Ephesians 5:25 says ... [He] "loved the church and He gave Himself up for her...."

Number seven. The church is being cleansed at this point by Christ for Himself. Ephesians 5:26, He gave Himself for her ... “that He might cleanse her ...that He might sanctify her....”

Number eight. And this one’s shocking. The church will be the bride of Jesus Christ. Look at Ephesians 5:27, He did all of this, He rescued her, He’s making her holy, in order that—verse 27, ... “He might present to Himself the church in all her glory, having no spot or wrinkle or any such thing, but that she would be holy and blameless.” And in the context of this section, He’s describing the church as the bride of Jesus Christ. Folks, there is no better or more powerful way to express Christ’s feelings about the church than this, to say that He thinks of her and seeks for her to be His bride.

Number nine. The church is nourished and cherished by Christ. Ephesians 5:29 says that Christ ... “nourishes and cherishes ... [the church] even as husbands [should] ... their ... wives.

Number ten. The church is inseparably bound to Jesus Christ. Look at Ephesians 5:31. “For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and shall be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh” permanently united. Verse 32, “This mystery is great; but I am speaking with reference to Christ and the church.” Paul is saying, listen, just as in marriage a man and woman are to be insolubly united, so has Christ been permanently united to His church. You begin to understand as you see what Paul says about the church here in Ephesians? Why Paul gave his life for the advancement of the church? Compare Paul’s great goal, living for the church, with that of many Christians who live for so many other priorities.

Do you understand that for most of church history if you were a Christian your life revolved around the church? When churches began to have their own buildings, often in communities that had been permeated by the gospel, those buildings were built in the center of town. You can still see that in the older villages of both Europe and America. The church was not only the center of spiritual life, it was even the center of social life. For true Christians, throughout church history, the church was the center of their world. Everything else revolved around and found its place in relation to the church.

But we live in a different day. And we're hearing different voices. George Barna, along with others, argues that this centrality of the church should no longer be true. In his book *Revolution* in which he argues for a totally different model of what—how Christians ought to live—outside of the church, he writes this “millions of people who are growing as Christians and passionate about their faith, have come to recognize that the local church is not and need not be the epicenter of their spiritual adventure” He goes on to argue that we ought to be committed to the universal church but not necessarily to a local one. Is Barna right? Is it time for a new model? A new approach to our faith? Should we be devoted to the universal church and not to the local one? Perhaps the model of a Christian living out his life as part of a local church is an outdated first century modality.

The Scriptural response is an emphatic no. Barna's thesis doesn't stand up to the test of Scripture. It is true the word church is used to speak of the universal church of all Christians everywhere—all true Christians everywhere. That's primarily how Paul uses it in Ephesians in the passages we just- passages we just looked at together. But the same word is used much more frequently in the New Testament of a local gathering of believers like this one. There are so many passages. I wrote a few in my notes, and I don't even have time to cover all those. Let me just take you to two.

Turn to 1 Corinthians 4, I Corinthians 4:17. Paul writes to one church in Corinth, and he says this “For this reason I have sent to you Timothy, who is by beloved and faithful child in the Lord, and he will remind you of my ways which are in Christ, just as I teach everywhere in every church.” The church wasn't merely universal for Paul. The church was local. You see it again over in 11:18 again, writing to one church, the church in Corinth. And in 11:18, in speaking about the Lord's supper and the abuses he says “For, in the first place, when you come together as a church ...” When you come together. In church is literally what he says. When you come together, you are the church. You, that local body of believers in Corinth.

Folks, when we come together, we are the church. In the last book of the New Testament, in Revelation, in the last time the word “church” occurs, it is used of seven local churches in Asia Minor. The word church often occurs in the plural—churches; thirty-five times in the New

Testament, clearly speaking of local churches. So, the local congregation, listen carefully, where the word of God is truly taught, is as really and truly a manifestation of “the church” as the whole is. That means that your relationship to the local church matters. In fact, in New Testament terms, your connection to the local church defines and reveals the nature of your relationship to the whole church of Jesus Christ.

So, with that in mind, let me ask you—how’s your relationship with the church? Can you honestly say that the church of Jesus Christ, this church that you’ve chosen to belong to, has its rightful place in your life? Again, we’re not talking about facilities. We’re not talking about the building. The building isn’t the church. We are the church, who come here to meet. Does the church have its rightful place in your life? Let me ask you some questions for you to evaluate the level of your commitment to the church of Jesus Christ. Just test yourself. You’ve seen the priority it was in Paul’s life. How is it in yours?

Number one. Is the gathering of the church on the Lord’s day for worship the high point of your week? Is the gathering of the church for worship on the Lord’s day the high point of your week?

Number two. Is the church your highest weekly priority?

Number three. Do you regularly attend, consistently give, and faithfully serve in the church? By the way, you might want to check that attendance issue. I don’t know if you saw the article in the Dallas Morning News about the Pew Study of Religion in America, but I thought it was fascinating in that article that when people were asked how often or if they attended on average once a week, 40% of Americans said they attend church on average once a week. When they actually study how many do, it’s 20%. So we, as in all things, as Americans we have a higher view of ourselves than reality, and it’s true with church attendance as well.

Number four. Is there any organization or activity that gets more of your time than the church? Now, I understand that God has given you responsibility to work, and He’s given—the Bible says six days shall you work. He’s given you a family that you need to care for and shepherd.

But beyond that, is there any organization or activity that gets more of your time than the church?

Number five. Does any other commitment demand more of your resources; your time, your money, your energy, than the church?

Number six, and this is really the key one. Does anything have more of your heart than the church? Think for a moment of all of the activities and organizations that you and your family are involved in. Just make a mental list of those things that really absorb a lot of your time and energies in this life. Let me ask you about those things.

Which one will deepen your knowledge of God and your relationship with Him? Which one will build the greatest character into your life and the lives of your children? Which one is eternal? Which one has God commanded you to be involved in? And which one has the highest priority to Christ? It's the church of Jesus Christ. Is it your highest priority?

Because God has revealed His great secret, you and I enjoy profound and intentional results. We have the privilege of free speech before God. We have the privilege of free access to God. We have the assurance of purpose in the midst of our troubles and trials and difficulties in this life. And we have the responsibility of the church as our great priority. Folks, God has let us in on His great secret. It's Christ. And it has profound results for all of us.

Let's pray together.

Our Father, we thank You for Ephesians 3. We thank You for this paragraph that points us so clearly to Your great eternal plan of the ages, focus on Christ and the church. Father, may those be our priorities in life and in death.

Father, I pray that You would help all of us as Christians to rethink our level of commitment to Your church. May we compare how we use our time and energies with Your priorities. O God, help us to see that some day, when we stand before You, all of those things that seem so

important to us now will all be burned up, and all that will remain will be our commitment and love for You and for Your church. Father, I ask that you would help us to reshape our lives and priorities around Your priorities. Help each of us individually to think about what this passage means for us and the changes we must make so that we can align ourselves with Your great plan of the ages—to exalt Your Son and to put Yourself on display in a redeemed humanity called the church.

We pray it in the name of our Lord and for His sake. Amen.