

29 August 2021
Ephesians 3:1-13
Partakers of God's Wisdom
First Mennonite Church

For a people supposed to be a "light to the nations," the Jews were remarkably lax about proselytizing, that is, encouraging those outside the Jewish faith to have faith. Judaism was a culture as well as a religion, a family as well as a faith. And you don't simply go around inviting strangers to join your family circle!

Suddenly that changed. Missionaries exploded out of Palestine. Paul was not the only one, though it is his travels

that were recorded in the book of Acts for us. The disciples of John the Baptist took his message of repentance and baptism into the Mediterranean basin before Paul. Thomas, Philip, Peter—all took the stunning news of the mystery of the risen Christ beyond the traditional boundaries.

In the first century there were religious groups that practiced what were known as "mystery religions." These were private exclusive groups with secret initiation rites and sacred meals that promised salvation for those with inside knowledge. In mystery religions, the "mystery" of salvation was largely dependent on individual spiritual experience, on secret knowledge, and it was restricted to the privileged few, smart enough to be let in on the secrets of salvation. Because of these features, some in the first century thought that the newly forming Christian church was just another mystery cult.

But the Christian mystery that exploded out of Palestine and went out into the ends of the earth and documented here in Ephesians was that in Christ, God has *a plan*



Kintsugi is the Japanese art of putting broken pottery pieces back together with gold, silver, or platinum. Kintsugi is a combination of two Japanese words: "Kin" meaning gold and "Tsugi" meaning joinery or repair. So literally, golden joinery. This art form does not hide the breakage or flaws but draws attention to how they can be put together. Gleaming seams hold together what was once divided. In a divided world, can the church be the world's "golden joinery"?



for the fullness of time, to gather up all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth (Ephesians 1:10).

The centre piece of God’s strategic plan, the goal towards which God is taking all of creation and history, is to gather up all things in Christ, things in heaven and things on earth.

All things is the Greek way of saying **everything**—people,

culture, and all relationships; the environment, including water, animals, plants, insects, air, rocks, — everything in the cosmos will be gathered up by God reconciled and restored to how God intended it. Jesus Christ is the “head” (1:22; 4:15) of God’s mission and the authority under which it operates.



“The wolf will live with the lamb...” (Isa. 11:6)

Instead of God being gracious, merciful, and loving to only a select few, God flings open the door of grace to everyone. Instead of building protective walls and barriers to protect and preserve the good, clean, and blessed ones, God tears down the dividing walls that separate cultures, races, political ideologies, and denominations from one another. Instead of eliminating a rebellious humanity, God chooses to make a new start with humanity via the shameful death of the Messiah.

The change within the Jewish faith from a somewhat exclusive culture and closed family to one that welcomes even enemies to become a part of God’s family is roughly equivalent, perhaps, to the queen suddenly throwing Buckingham Palace open to everyone in London. Or banana plantation owners in Guatemala turning their land over to peasant farmers in the hills. Or, maybe for the CIA to unlock its top-secret files, giving access to anyone who would like to look around, and flinging away the key forever.

Now, God’s plan of reconciliation and unity of all things has real and immediate impact. The first concrete example of God’s plan unfolding is that *“the Gentiles have become fellow heirs, members of the same body, and sharers in the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel”* (Ephesians 3:6).

This is just an aside, but in the weeks to come, as we move into chapters 4-6, we will explore some of the practical implications of God’s plan as it leaves no stone unturned. We will explore, for examples, how God’s plan reconstructs human communities, marriage relationships, family life, economic systems, and provides

the church with the equipment and tools necessary to battle against the powers and principalities that oppose God's plan.

But here in chapter 3, we are still looking at the big picture of God's salvation. The mystery that Paul is talking about here in Ephesians is not new. Nor is it something that requires special insight or intelligence. There are no secret handshakes or passwords. The mystery that was once hidden, but now revealed is that God's plan is to save all things, including even—maybe especially—those people we think are furthest away from God.

When Christians talk about God's salvation, we tend to limit it to rather narrow and highly individualistic understandings. We tend to speak of salvation as having our soul saved so that when we die, we will go to heaven. Now, don't get me wrong, I'm a firm believer in individual transformation, of personal faith impacting how we live in this world. But salvation is so much more. Here in Ephesians, God's plan is to save the cosmos, not just you and me, but all things.

Here on the prairies where Russian Mennonites are ubiquitous, we often get side-tracked from God's plan of reconciliation and unity and focus instead on the church. When we focus on the church, we tend to focus on the institution, the structure, and its various rites and practices, like baptism and communion. We draw boundaries, set limits, and argue over who is in and who is out. We maintain and our focus is inward.

When we focus on the gospel—the indiscriminate gift of grace that God in Christ has given everybody—then we remember that Christ has come for everyone, that we are only a community of highly fallible people who has been entrusted with the gospel (the good news). When our focus on the gospel, then our focus is outward—on mission.



I have spoken at length about God's plan. And now I turn to the question about how God's plan will be implemented. Who will carry it out? Here's an example from baseball. When you are at the bottom of the 9th inning, the bases are loaded, and your team has 2 outs, everyone on the team is kinda hoping that the person going up to home plate is the team's strongest hitters, is someone near the top of the batting order.

God's ways, however, are not our ways. Rather than choosing saints and super heroes of the faith, God instead chose Paul, a persecutor of Christians in his earlier life who was afflicted with a thorn in his flesh. God also chose the apostle Peter, who came across as rough and tough, but then at one critical moment, he denied his master. God also chose Mary, a third-class woman who wound up being the first witness to the resurrection.



Who is to carry out God's grandiose cosmic plan? In 3:2, it says, God commissioned Paul to share the mystery of the gospel with others. God has placed the treasure of the gospel into our hands, entrusted the gospel to you and me, to the church. You and me. First Mennonite Church. We are partakers of God's plan. Imagine that!

Verse 10 contains one of those breathtaking statements about the mission of the church that are part of Ephesians. It says,

"...so that through the church the wisdom of God in its rich variety might now be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly places."

"So that through the church..." (3:10) defines God's mission as the mission and vocation of the church. The "wisdom of God in all its rich variety" (3:10) will now become known to the "rulers and authorities in the heavenly places" (3:10).

The purpose of the church is to make this wisdom of God known to the "rulers and authorities in the heavenly places." These are the powers that many believed threatened the world, powers that might be visible in political and social dynamics but that had a reality which was more than human. We might see such powers today in the form of racism, perpetual poverty, within a culture of an organisation or company, oppressive political and economic structures, or the ways in which all systems are bent in favour of the few.

Several years ago, the Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops put out a statement that not only provided a snapshot of poverty in Canada but also addressed the role that the lack of adequate housing had in perpetuating the cycle of poverty. Part of it said:



“As Christians, we see it as our duty to support safe, secure, and affordable housing which will in turn recognize the God-given dignity of each person and contribute to the building of a more just, fair, and healthy society as a

whole.” – Poverty in Canada, CCCB¹

They were criticized for issuing this report, maybe even from some within the Catholic Church. Some business groups accused the bishops of being naive and exceeding their competence while others criticized the church for venturing into areas it didn't belong. The critics said, the Church should keep its focus on faith. Faith is a private matter, and so the church should stay out of public discussions, including discussions about economics.

My point in using this example is that Ephesians doesn't limit God's plan to just personal faith; it has the audacity to venture into intimate relationships between husband and wife behind closed doors. The agenda of Ephesians is as broad as the cosmic plan is big: **all things, all things, all things** (1:10). There is nothing that is not on the agenda of the plan of God and therefore the agenda of the church.

When I lived in China, I learnt to know how a small, insignificant, and powerless Church lived in an environment where the government was big, powerful, and influential. Because of the Church's historical ties to the West, especially past ties to western governments



¹ <https://news.rcdos.ca/2019/10/28/cccb-statement-about-poverty-in-canada/>

and militaries, the Chinese government was obviously very suspicious of the Church. As a result, there were many, many rules and regulations for the Church, mostly about what the Church couldn't do. One of them was about SS. The government forbade the Church from teaching the faith to children under the age of 18. Yet, when I lived there and attended Church, I noticed a lot of children in Church. The congregations I attended even operated Sunday Schools for children. So, I asked one of the leaders how they could run SS when the government said they couldn't. The leader smiled and said, "mums and dads come to Church. When they come, they can't leave their children at home by themselves, so they must bring them along. Children like to move around and make noise and cause disruption in the worship service. So we put them together in a room. We can't just leave them in the room with nothing to do, so we have people tell them Bible stories and engage them in various activities."

What the leader described to me was SS! I'm sure things are different today, but years ago these SS classes were called various things, like "the Sunshine group" or "the bright lights". The Church didn't use the word SS as this would have got them into trouble with the government; instead, they used different words, but operated SSs!

Sometimes communicating the wisdom of God in all its rich variety to the "rulers and authorities in the heavenly places" requires creativity and flexibility. One of the hallmarks of Christian life ought to be our creativity and flexibility!

Maybe, the church can be like the Japanese Kintsugi artists who forge together divided pieces of pottery into something beautiful. Perhaps, in a polarized and divided culture, our truthful words and deeds can help create the space where God can forge unity, bringing peace and reconciliation.

In the face of the rulers and authorities in heavenly places, the church is not called to survive, or to protect itself, or to increase membership, or to make people feel better. It is called to be the sign, promise, and embodiment of what God intends for the whole world, and to do so in the face of, and in witness to, the opposing powers of the world. The church is called to be a living declaration that the powers of this world cannot stand; their final defeat is assured.

In Ephesians chapters 1-3, the mystery that was hidden but has now been revealed is about God's strategic plan to reconstruct creation. God has a mission to restore (reconcile, unify) the entire created order to its originally intended purposes. Jesus Christ is the "head" (1:22; 4:15) of this mission and the authority under which it

operates. God has chosen you and me—the church—to carry out this plan. May God empower us with the fruits of the Spirit so that we can be worthy of this high calling. Amen