

**Created to Reveal and Display
Ephesians 3**

Brothers and sisters, the “Church” has been around for a little over two thousand years now and that is more than enough time to evolve through a variety of forms and expressions and stylistic changes, pick up a few stereo-types, and have a couple of golden ages.

It begins with the early church of the New Testament and then becomes the official church of the Roman Empire. Eventually there is a falling out between the western church and the Eastern churches - the western church becomes the Roman Catholic Church and the eastern church becomes the Orthodox Church, the official church of the Byzantine Empire.

The Roman Catholic Church is an integral part of the efforts to unite Europe in the Holy Roman Empire and after that point we move into the medieval phase of the Roman Church.

After this we have the Protestant Reformation and the founding of the Anglican Church in Great Britain.

Then the Church in its various branches of Roman Catholicism, Anglicanism and Protestantism is part of the global expansion and exploration of the various European empires and brings the Christian faith to the far corners of the world.

And while Roman Catholicism was significant in shaping South America, and Anglicanism was prominent in Africa, the Protestants – specifically the Anabaptists, Puritans, Quakers, and Plymouth Brethren were drawn to America and played a significant role in the founding of the United States, and they contributed heavily to the distinctive brand of Christianity and expressions of the Church that have developed since then.

Chances are... if there is a particular stereo-type of the Church that you relate to or are familiar with – it has been influenced by the American Church.

The “overseas missions” push from the 50’s, the Jesus movement in the 60’s that gave birth to contemporary music and informal worship style, the Pentecostal revival and charismatic renewal movements that gained traction in the

70's and birthed whole new denominations, the Church growth movement of the 80's, the prominence of Mega-churches in the 90's and early 2000's... and there is the current polarization which the political landscape and cultural wars of the past ten years have had on the conservative and liberal branches of the church.

And these various movements and developments have impacted and influenced us, and shaped we think about the church, and what it is and what it ought to be doing.

For some of us the church is primarily as a social organization. It provides a sense of community and belonging and is a place to connect with people and make friends. You can get involved and contribute and give back to your community.

Some of us see the church as a place of refuge. At the end of a long week, after being battered about in the hostile world we can find shelter in a place which doesn't have the back biting and bickering that goes on at work, it doesn't have the

crassness and the crudeness found in pop-culture, we can get away from all the ugliness and unbiblical thinking out there.

And others of us believe that the church is THE Institution which carries the authority on what to believe, the organization that can give the final word on the truth, God, salvation and other matters of faith.

Then there are those of us who want the church to be the Preserver. A place that keeps the better values and traditions of our past alive, or provides a context where a particular ethnic sub-culture has space and place to exist and continue with-in our multi-cultural society.

And last but not least many of us believe that the church should be like James Bond – Agent Double-Oh-Heaven – that we have a mission, and that it is our reason for existence. We need to be fighting moral and spiritual evil, or we must be solving social problems and standing up for those who are oppressed and pursuing social justice.

And these are just some of the ways that we might think about the Church and identify what it should be doing.

Now instead of asking you to reflect on which description connects with you the most – I'd like you to turn to the person next to you and tell them which one is most significant for you and why? I'll give you a minute and a half – so be concise.

Now, after all this review and focus and discussion about what the church is and what is ought to be doing - I want to ask you to imagine a world without the Church...

A world where there are no church buildings – modern, traditional or even historic ruins... A world where there are no church gatherings – no worship services, no church picnics, no youth groups, or men's groups or women's groups...

A world where there are no church missions – no soup kitchens, no food drives, no Shoebox campaigns, no evangelism efforts or Philip Sundays... A world where there are no church congregations that you belong to...

We need to imagine a world without the Church brothers and sisters... so that we can get away from all the traditions, stereo-types and pre-conceived notions of the church that have accrued in our minds over the years - and understand how the new believers and early Christians that Paul was addressing in this letter to the Ephesians - had no clue what they were becoming a part of... nobody did – the Church was something completely new.

Up until this point there had only been the chosen people of God – the nation of Israel – heirs to the covenant of Promise that God had made with Abraham, recipients of the covenant of Law that God had given them through Moses, and for many years they had been waiting for God to restore the covenant of Kingship that He had established with King David.

And if you know anything about the story of the nation of Israel you know that it was often Israel against the world.

If they weren't being corrupted and lead astray by the surrounding nations to worship false gods and abandon the

covenant distinctives they were being attacked and conquered, oppressed or taken into captivity...

Conversely the surrounding nations found the Israelite claim to be God's chosen people and know His Laws rather arrogant, and their strict adherence to and refusal to compromise their Covenant distinctives was seen as obstinate and offensive – so there was no love lost for the Jews on the part of those who were called Gentiles either.

Jews and Gentiles liked each other about as much as the current Jews and Palestinians do...

To be sure – some Gentiles were drawn to the goodness and beauty of the Law of God, and the worship of the one true God in the Temple – there had always been some Gentiles who had joined God's people and taken on the Covenant responsibilities, distinctives and signs.

We think of Rahab from Jericho when Israel conquered the Promised Land, we think of Ruth the Moabite who married

Boaz, we think of the Ethiopian Eunuch who had come to Jerusalem to worship at the temple...

And it had always been God's intention in choosing Israel and setting them apart as His chosen people that they would be a holy people, a royal priesthood and a light to the nations around them – revealing the knowledge of the one true God.

God even made sure to include a special court in His Temple where Gentiles could come to seek Him and worship Him, and it was this court which the money changers and animal dealers had taken over for their businesses. (John 2:13-22)

And you remember that Jesus was angry about this and He cleared them out of the Gentile court by flipping over their tables and whipping the merchants.

And Jesus was angry because they didn't care that had taken away the place where the Gentiles could come and seek God in His temple – the Gentiles didn't matter to them.

So it's fair to say that Jews and Gentiles got along like Democrats and Trump supporters.

Now brothers and sisters I say all this so that you can appreciate just how radical and unprecedented it was that for Paul to write in vs. 4 that *“through the gospel the Gentiles are heirs together with Israel, members together of one body, and sharers together in the promise in Christ Jesus.”*

This would be seen by most Jews the way we see the equalization payment scheme where Alberta does all the heavy lifting and Quebec gets extra money...

And it would be seen by the Gentiles who believed in Jesus Christ the way we Albertans see travelling to BC - We like all the amazing scenery and mountains and mild climate – but we can do without the smug self-righteous environmentalism and anti-pipeline rhetoric thank-you very much.

We easily miss just how incredible it is that Paul is teaching how God is putting Jews and Gentiles together.

Now this background information is very important to understand and appreciate the context that Paul is speaking into – and it also explains why the very first thing that Paul wants new believers to know about the church and its purpose is that it *“displays the iridescent wisdom of God to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly realms”* (vs. 10)

Think about that for a moment brothers and sisters – when you shared which view of the church was significant for you and why – you didn't pick this explanation did you!

And if you had the chance to tell someone about the church and they knew absolutely nothing at all about it - had never even heard of the church before - you probably wouldn't go to Ephesians 3:10 and say *“here this is the first thing you need to understand about the church! : “It was created to display the iridescent wisdom of God to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly realms!”*

But it is this – and not the pragmatic definitions that we often use - that the Apostle Paul considers to be the very first thing,

the foundational thing; we might even say the most important thing... to know about the purpose of the church.

Paul could have used this opportunity to present teaching about the Church being the body of Christ and us all having our functions as members – just like he does in his letter to the Corinthians – but he doesn't – that is a secondary teaching, and this is a primary teaching.

So - what is this iridescent wisdom of God that the church is created to display? It is the ways in which God makes a way when there seems to be no way!

You see brothers and sisters, in the Covenant relationships that God sets out with us humans – right from the very beginning He always seems to get caught between a rock and a hard place in having to enforce the consequences for Covenant unfaithfulness and His desire to have a faithful Covenant partner.

And the story of the Old Testament is the story of how every time it looks like God is just going to have to give up on His creation because of human unfaithfulness... God comes up with some ingenious way to enact the covenant consequences AND at the same time bring mercy to save humans from their disobedience.

And the hostile relationship between Jews and Gentiles was a result of how the Mosaic Covenant seemed to put God in one of those Catch 22 situations. From a human perspective it looked like God was only concerned about saving His chosen people while the rest of the nations were damned.

But then in sending Jesus Christ, and through the incarnation, and Christ's death and resurrection God pulls off the greatest double play ever – so that through Jesus both the Jews and the Gentiles can be forgiven for being unfaithful to the Covenant and for being outside the Covenant- simultaneously.

It is simply amazing how God in His wisdom (skill) managed to do this! And that's why we had to spend so much time

understanding the context this morning – so that we can appreciate how amazing it really is.

Now, most bibles use the word manifold or multi-faceted to describe this wisdom. But that betrays our typical pragmatic approach to the purpose of the church. It is technically correct because there are many different facets to how God fulfills the covenants in Jesus. *(The fact that we have 4 or 5 different pragmatic understandings of the church shows this.)*

But the word Paul actually uses is “iridescent” and iridescent is multifaceted but it’s also beautiful, like mother-of-pearl or a highly polished ammonite shell. It sparkles, it is luminous, its colors shift and change depending on the angle and the light.

Iridescent is something that captivates and you can spend time simply gazing and marveling at the wonder of what you are looking at – and according to Paul the Church is created to display this iridescent wisdom of God in this way to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly realms.

In other words, the angelic beings that make up God’s Heavenly Court, see the Church and how God has created this “thing” in Christ and all the different aspects it has to it, and it is luminous and it sparkles and it is amazing and wondrous to them to see it, they marvel at it.

Especially because these angelic beings have been watching and wondering throughout the ages to see exactly how God was going to bring BOTH about justice and mercy in His Covenant relationship with us.

Don’t forget - this option was not extended to the angels – when Lucifer fell to his pride and became Satan and took 1/3 of the angels with him and was cast out of heaven – they were damned and are being held for judgement, there was no mercy. (2 Peter 2:4, Jude 1:6)

So – brothers and sisters, when we think about the church, when we see the church, when we come to worship here at Valleyview – are we seeing the iridescent wisdom of God revealed and are we aware that we are on display for mighty

Angelic beings to marvel over as an example of how God can bring BOTH justice and mercy?

Or are we still fussing about whether or not we like the music, or whether the sermon is too long, or some other pragmatic aspect of what it means for us to be the church – if we are, our understanding of church is too small.

You see brothers and sisters, as Paul ends the first half of his letter – and before he starts getting into all the pragmatic details of Christian living in chapters 4-6, he wants to make sure that we do not have a tiny view of the church.

Instead Paul wants to give us a BIG view of the church – and his choice of words and phrases in this chapter is pushing us to see the church in a BIG way.

Just look at all the BIG things Paul mentions; in vs. 8 there is the BOUNDLESS riches of Christ, in vs. 9 it is God who has created ALL things. In vs. 11 there is the ETERNAL purpose of

God and in vs. 15 Paul refers to EVERY family in HEAVEN AND EARTH, and it keeps on going...

Vs. 18 together with ALL the Lord's holy people to grasp HOW WIDE, LONG, HIGH AND DEEP is Christ's love...

Vs. 19 this love SURPASSES ALL knowledge, and that we may be filled to the MEASURE OF ALL FULLNESS..

Vs. 20 to him who is able to do IMMEASURABLY MORE than ALL we can ask or imagine... and finally in vs. 21 that there would be glory to God throughout ALL generations FOREVER and EVER.

It's BIG stuff, Paul wants us to think BIG about the church...

But not first and foremost in a pragmatic way, he wants us to grasp the reality and magnitude of the Cosmic Church – not to think we need to make plans to build a megachurch.

Brothers and sisters when we begin to think BIG about the church and when we start to see the Cosmic church and when we know our primary purpose is to display the iridescent

wisdom of God to the angels... it changes our relationship with the church, how we act - right here in Valleyview.

Because we see we are a part of something bigger than ourselves – waaaay bigger than ourselves.

And that somehow helps to take the focus off of ourselves and all our problems and gives us a different perspective on life.

And the church is waaaay bigger and more profound than anything else in this world as well – what other institution, business, club or political organization displays God's iridescent wisdom to the Heavenly Court the way that the church does??

There is nothing else in the whole universe like the Church.

But brothers and sisters – we keep thinking that if we make church (*as if we can really make the church*) if we make it pragmatic and practical that we can draw more people to it...

But in attempting to do that - we make the church just like everything else... and then the church is not BIG enough to inspire people to sacrifice their Sunday morning and whatever else they might do with it to come and experience the transcendence of what the Church truly is supposed to do.

It was Paul's BIG cosmic view of what God was doing in creating the Church that convinced him it was worth suffering for and going to prison for.

It is a BIG and cosmic view of the Church that is inspiring our Chinese brothers and sisters to stand strong in the face of persecution and risk going to prison as well – they see beyond what they can see in just a pragmatic view and beyond their own personal interests - and they can see that it is worth it.

But most of all brothers and sisters we need a BIG cosmic view of the Church so that we know the scope and depth of what God is really up to among us – here in our little church...

Too often, myself included, we look at our numbers, our accomplishments, our resources, our enthusiasm and zeal and the impact that we have – and it all seems rather insignificant.

Or our experience of worship or community and ministry is less than inspiring or perhaps even hurtful and we've been on the wrong end of someone's sinful nature.

It's kind of like going into a child's room and seeing how they've made a castle or a spaceship out of some old couch cushions and blankets and cardboard boxes... its less than impressive and doesn't look like much.

But – that child is able to see beyond how things appear to be and in their mind - that Castle is more amazing than the Chateau Lake Louise, and that Space Ship is faster than the Millennium Falcon.

Brothers and sisters – a BIG view of the church is like a child's imagination, allowing us to see that what goes on here at

Valleyview is grander, and more significant and amazing than what we see at first glance.

And it is really real – and the way to grasp it and envision it, is not so much to imagine it (though that can help...) but to be empowered by the Holy Spirit so that we can see it.

And I can only pray that the Holy Spirit will use this message this morning to do that – to give us that BIGGER view of the Church and allow us to see how little-old Valleyview is somehow displaying the iridescent wisdom of God to the mighty Angels in the Heavenly court this morning...

So let me do that right now – let's pray...

Heavenly Father, out of your glorious riches please strengthen us with power through your Spirit in our inner being, so that Christ may dwell in our hearts through faith. And may we, being rooted and established in your love, have the power, together with all your holy people, to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ, and to know this love that surpasses knowledge, that we may be filled to the measure of all the fullness of God. Now to him who is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, according to his power that is at work within us, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, for ever and ever! Amen.