

Reconciliation and Justice Conference 2014

Perspectives on Ephesians

Initial definition of terms:

What do we mean by “reconciliation”?

Ephesians 1:7-10 ⁷ In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of his grace, ⁸ which he lavished upon us, in all wisdom and insight ⁹ making known to us the mystery of his will, according to his purpose, which he set forth in Christ ¹⁰ as a plan for the fullness of time, to unite all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth.

Colossians 1:15-20 ¹⁵ He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation. ¹⁶ For by him all things were created, in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities- all things were created through him and for him. ¹⁷ And he is before all things, and in him all things hold together. ¹⁸ And he is the head of the body, the church. He is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, that in everything he might be preeminent. ¹⁹ For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, ²⁰ and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, making peace by the blood of his cross.

We believe God, in and through the death-resurrection-ascension of Jesus the Messiah is reversing the deadly, oppressive division and brokenness of the fall and is re-uniting, restoring, bringing back together everyone and everything in the whole created order- seen and unseen- under the Headship of Jesus, to be the expression of God’s glory and goodness we were originally created for.

We believe the reconciliation and restoration work on behalf of humanity in particular is centered on and built around two primary areas of focus, which is the primary focus of the Law: our reconciliation to God and our reconciliation to one another.

We believe reconciliation has a God-defined look to it, reflected in Acts 2:

Men, women and children from diverse ethnic and language backgrounds, as well as diverse social and economic backgrounds, who were formerly divided, segregated and even enemies, coming together with all their diversity in the same community as family; worshiping and learning from God together through the anointing of the Spirit; intimately fellowshiping with one another and forgiving each other; deeply, practically caring for one another in all physical and spiritual needs, especially providing for the materially poor- any who are hungry and without basic life necessities, including especially the widow, the fatherless and the immigrant; and then, taking that invitation of reconciliation to God and one another out to the hurting nations of the world and inviting them into the family and kingdom rule of God through faith in Jesus Christ.

What do we mean by “justice”?

Micah 6:⁶ "With what shall I come before the LORD, and bow myself before God on high? Shall I come before him with burnt offerings, with calves a year old? ⁷ Will the LORD be pleased with thousands of rams, with ten thousands of rivers of oil? Shall I give my firstborn for my transgression, the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul?" ⁸ He has told you, O man, what is good; and what does the LORD require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?

We understand God’s requirement to practice justice as the call for his people to practically implement his righteousness in the earth - establishing what is right and good in all the places where people have suffered the injustice and unrighteousness of sin. We believe the broken peoples and nations of the world both “ought to” and “need to” see that righteousness/justice of God intervene in their life circumstances.

We are not using the term justice in reference to that aspect of justice that is a punishment for evil. That is a part of God’s justice and is often closely linked with God’s deliverance of the oppressed and the establishment of what is right by the removal of what is evil. We can all be glad God will punish all forms of evil, destructive, abusive sin which have not humbled themselves for free pardon and forgiveness in Christ. It is God’s Sovereign, wise responsibility to pour out wrath on evil. We are called to overcome evil with good

This aspect of justice we are talking about is described in Scripture as part of God’s glory as it relates to his positive establishment of good on behalf of those in need, and is intertwined with his righteousness, holiness, love, compassion, faithfulness and glory.

His righteousness: Psalm 9:7-10 ⁷ But the LORD sits enthroned forever; he has established his throne for justice, ⁸ and he judges the world with righteousness; he judges the peoples with uprightness. ⁹ The LORD is a stronghold for the oppressed, a stronghold in times of trouble. ¹⁰ And those who know your name put their trust in you, for you, O LORD, have not forsaken those who seek you.”

His holiness: Psalm 68:4-6 ⁴ Sing to God, sing praises to his name; lift up a song to him who rides through the deserts; his name is the LORD; exult before him! ⁵ Father of the fatherless and protector of widows is God in his holy habitation. ⁶ God settles the solitary in a home; he leads out the prisoners to prosperity, but the rebellious dwell in a parched land.

His love: Psalm 33:4-5 ⁴ For the word of the LORD is upright, and all his work is done in faithfulness. ⁵ He loves righteousness and justice; the earth is full of the steadfast love of the LORD.

Everyone needs this kind of justice-righteousness actively brought into their lives, and those who need it most are the poor and the oppressed, the marginalized and the excluded.

We believe it is not possible to talk about God's "glory" "righteousness" "love" or "holiness", without reference to his commitment to bring justice on behalf of the poor and oppressed.

We also believe this commitment to bring justice to the nations of the earth and especially to the poor and needy is a central defining mark of the work of the Messiah promised throughout Scripture.

Isaiah 9:6-7 ⁶ For to us a child is born, to us a son is given; and the government shall be upon his shoulder, and his name shall be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. ⁷ Of the increase of his government and of peace there will be no end, on the throne of David and over his kingdom, to establish it and to uphold it with justice and with righteousness from this time forth and forevermore. The zeal of the LORD of hosts will do this.

Isaiah 11:1-5 Isaiah 11:1 There shall come forth a shoot from the stump of Jesse, and a branch from his roots shall bear fruit. ² And the Spirit of the LORD shall rest upon him, the Spirit of wisdom and understanding, the Spirit of counsel and might, the Spirit of knowledge and the fear of the LORD. ³ And his delight shall be in the fear of the LORD. He shall not judge by what his eyes see, or decide disputes by what his ears hear, ⁴ but with righteousness he shall judge the poor, and decide with equity for the meek of the earth; and he shall strike the earth with the rod of his mouth, and with the breath of his lips he shall kill the wicked. ⁵ Righteousness shall be the belt of his waist, and faithfulness the belt of his loins.

Isaiah 42:1-4 Isaiah 42:1 Behold my servant, whom I uphold, my chosen, in whom my soul delights; I have put my Spirit upon him; he will bring forth justice to the nations. ² He will not cry aloud or lift up his voice, or make it heard in the street; ³ a bruised reed he will not break, and a faintly burning wick he will not quench; he will faithfully bring forth justice. ⁴ He will not grow faint or be discouraged till he has established justice in the earth; and the coastlands wait for his law.

Isaiah 61:1-3 Isaiah 61:1 The Spirit of the Lord GOD is upon me, because the LORD has anointed me to bring good news to the poor; he has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and the opening of the prison to those who are bound; ² to proclaim the year of the LORD's favor, and the day of vengeance of our God; to comfort all who mourn; ³ to grant to those who mourn in Zion- to give them a beautiful headdress instead of ashes, the oil of gladness instead of mourning, the garment of praise instead of a faint spirit; that they may be called oaks of righteousness, the planting of the LORD, that he may be glorified.

Luke 4:16-21 ¹⁶ And he came to Nazareth, where he had been brought up. And as was his custom, he went to the synagogue on the Sabbath day, and he stood up to read. ¹⁷ And the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was given to him. He unrolled the scroll and found the place where

it was written, ¹⁸ "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim liberty to the captives and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed, ¹⁹ to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor." ²⁰ And he rolled up the scroll and gave it back to the attendant and sat down. And the eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on him. ²¹ And he began to say to them, "Today this Scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing."

Therefore, to speak of being conformed to the image of Christ, or to abide in the love of Christ cannot be exclusive of the practice of justice, but must be a central mark in the life of the believer and the church who, together, are the body of Christ in this world.

We believe it is impossible to talk about any major portion of Scripture without keeping these two inter-connected issues of reconciliation and justice actively in mind as we read the narrative of Scripture, just like we do with other structurally defining issues like the covenants, the atonement, the anointing of the Spirit, the Christ-centered tone of all Scripture, the grace of God, etc. Reconciliation and justice are part of the backdrop, and most times a significant front-and-center part, of the whole narrative of Scripture. All of these things exist, of course, in the living context of the already inaugurated – not-yet-but-ultimately-will-be-fully-realized nature of the good news of the kingdom.

This morning, we want to look at Ephesians through these themes as a central, valuable way to understand Paul's message to us.

Eph 1 A new look at some standard doctrine: election, predestination and glorification

A. Why we need to change the grid from a question of individual, personal salvation...

For some time the questions we have often tried to answer in the evangelical/reformed church as we look at a book like Ephesians have revolved around issues of "personal salvation": assurance of God's love and acceptance as his child type questions. And the application is often for personal benefit.

There is a place for this. However, taken on its own face value presentation, the main thrust of the passage is meant, first of all, to address us corporately about our collective calling and the promises of God for his work through us together as the church.

In the end the benefit of the enormity of the promises, even in the first chapter, let alone the rest of the book, can get diminished because if it is all about "me" in a personalized, individualized sense; there is not enough room for application in that framework to bear the immense weight of these promises.

B. The fullness of the promises for us together, as the church, pursuing the reconciliation of all things in a context of justice-righteousness

1. Chosen together, as the reconciled people of God to be “holy and blameless”

Ephesians 1:3-4 ³ Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places, ⁴ even as he chose us in him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and blameless before him.

While we never want to remove the personal and individual aspect of assurance every believer can draw from these texts for their own lives, we need to recognize that “election” and being “chosen” are presented to us within the context of corporately being chosen together, as his reconciled people, for a very specific purpose: holiness and blamelessness.

If we plug in the justice-righteousness and justice-holiness described in the Psalms and other Old Testament scriptures as part of the backdrop of understanding these terms, it can transform our view of the church. To be “holy” is, in the negative, to be set apart from sin; but in the positive, active sense of the word, to be holy in all we are and do as the church includes the reconciled people of God implementing righteousness/justice in all things and especially on behalf of the oppressed- the fatherless, the widow, the immigrant and the poor.

Likewise, we know the call to be blameless is not a call to sinless perfection. Rather, it has a rich biblical-theological backdrop of being “blameless” like Noah- who in an evil and oppressive and unjust and violent world, was righteous/just, “in a complete way” (Hebrew) which can dynamically translated as “blameless” (Gen 6:9). Not sinless; but just/righteous, not guilty of the oppression and injustice of the world around him. We also are called together as the church to be “without blemish” (Grk,) when it comes to the oppression of sin as well.

We are chosen, as Abraham’s offspring, Jew and Gentile together (Romans 4:16ff.) to “bless the nations of the earth” by teaching them what justice and righteousness look like through the practice of our lives together as God’s people.

Genesis 18:16-19 ¹⁶ Then the men set out from there, and they looked down toward Sodom. And Abraham went with them to set them on their way. ¹⁷ The LORD said, "Shall I hide from Abraham what I am about to do, ¹⁸ seeing that Abraham shall surely become a great and mighty nation, and all the nations of the earth shall be blessed in him? ¹⁹ For I have chosen him, that he may command his children and his household after him to keep the way of the LORD by doing righteousness and justice, so that the LORD may bring to Abraham what he has promised him."

2. Predestined as the reconciled body to see this holiness-righteousness-justice of God come to expression

Ephesians 1:5-6 ⁵ In love he predestined us for adoption through Jesus Christ, according to the purpose of his will, ⁶ to the praise of his glorious grace, with which he has blessed us in the Beloved. ⁷ In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of his grace, ⁸ which he lavished upon us, in all wisdom and insight ⁹ making known to us the mystery of his will, according to his purpose, which he set forth in Christ ¹⁰ as a plan for the fullness of time, to unite all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth. ¹¹ In him we have obtained an inheritance, having been predestined according to the purpose of him who works all things according to the counsel of his will, ¹² so that we who were the first to hope in Christ might be to the praise of his glory.

Predestination is in the context of “uniting all things under the headship of Christ” and it is predestination for adoption as “sons” - “sons” meaning Christ as the firstborn of many brothers –Rom 8:28-29

This reconciled, united-with-God-and-united-with-one-another people of God being conformed to the image of the Son must include his Messianic purpose of bringing justice for the poor of the earth (Isa 9,11,41,61). It includes many other things as well, but this is surely a clear, undeniable central part of what the image of Christ means.

All things working together (Romans 8), all things working according to the counsel of his will (Eph 1) means God is going to Sovereignly use all things, including the injustice of rulers and dictators that we experience in life, to help shape us as this reconciled people to bring God’s purposes of righteousness-justice to expression. This is part of the freedom of entering into “the sufferings of Christ.” The confidence is not just that “we will make it through somehow” but that God’s restorative justice and righteousness will come to expression through the people of God because God has sovereignly pre-determined nothing can stop it. This is the point of Paul’s prayer in Eph 1:18-22

3. Sealed by the Spirit to guarantee our glorification-inheritance. Eph 1:13ff.

What inheritance? It certainly cannot be less than all things reunited in Christ, the heavens, the earth, the universe, the nations.

That sealing of the Spirit must include the guarantee of the practical expression of the Messianic promise of Isa 9, 11, 41 and 61 lived out in and through the reconciled body of Christ, cf. Acts 2, 4

Eph 2 An amazing grace that produces justice and reconciliation

A. The grid of assurance for personal salvation as the predominant question we bring to Scripture, if we are not careful, can reduce the grace of God to a standing of assurance before God totally apart from the presence of any corroborating manifestation of justice-righteousness; and if individualized, can lead to a diminished joy that simply says “I am in” without regard for the profound human reconciliation achieved through the grace of God’s work in the Cross.

B. The grace that produces justice and reconciliation

Ephesians 2:1-10 And you were dead in the trespasses and sins ² in which you once walked, following the course of this world, following the prince of the power of the air, the spirit that is now at work in the sons of disobedience- ³ among whom we all once lived in the passions of our flesh, carrying out the desires of the body and the mind, and were by nature children of wrath, like the rest of mankind. ⁴ But God, being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which he loved us, ⁵ even when we were dead in our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ- by grace you have been saved- ⁶ and raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus, ⁷ so that in the coming ages he might show the immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus. ⁸ For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, ⁹ not a result of works, so that no one may boast. ¹⁰ For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them.

1. 2:1-10 The climax of the focus on God’s grace that comes to spiritually dead, unworthy and broken sinners, is that this grace turns us into people who are being shaped by The Master Craftsman into people who do good works. In fact, this is what we were “created in Christ Jesus” to do.

Westminster Confession of Faith Chapter 16:1

Good Works

“Good works are only such as God has commanded in his holy Word, and not such as, without the warrant of Scripture, are devised by men out of blind zeal or any pretense of good intention.”

That means these good works cannot be separated from the following explicit teaching in Scripture:

Jeremiah 22:15-16

“ Do you think you are a king because you compete in cedar? Did not your father eat and drink and do justice and righteousness? Then it was well with him. ¹⁶ He judged the cause of the poor and needy; then it was well. Is not this to know me? declares the LORD.

Isaiah 58:6-11 ⁶ "Is not this the fast that I choose: to loose the bonds of wickedness, to undo the straps of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free, and to break every yoke? ⁷ Is it not to share your bread with the hungry and bring the homeless poor into your house; when you see the naked, to cover him, and not to hide yourself from your own flesh? ⁸ Then shall your light break forth like the dawn, and your healing shall spring up speedily; your righteousness shall go before you; the glory of the LORD shall be your rear guard. ⁹ Then you shall call, and the LORD will answer; you shall cry, and he will say, 'Here I am.' If you take away the yoke from your midst, the pointing of the finger, and speaking wickedness, ¹⁰ if you pour yourself out for the hungry and satisfy the desire of the afflicted, then shall your light rise in the darkness and your gloom be as the noonday. ¹¹ And the LORD will guide you continually and satisfy your desire in scorched places and make your bones strong; and you shall be like a watered garden, like a spring of water, whose waters do not fail.

Matthew 25:31-36 ³¹ "When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, then he will sit on his glorious throne. ³² Before him will be gathered all the nations, and he will separate people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats. ³³ And he will place the sheep on his right, but the goats on the left. ³⁴ Then the King will say to those on his right, 'Come, you who are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world. ³⁵ For I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, ³⁶ I was naked and you clothed me, I was sick and you visited me, I was in prison and you came to me.'

These passages do not reflect all there is to “good works” but what is clear is that these kinds of good works are so central and crucial to the expression of God’s character of holiness and faithful love that God Himself uses them as a litmus test- if we get these, we will get the others- and we dare not replace that litmus test with something else.

2. 2:11-22 It is also a focus in understanding the nature of God's grace, his "favor," given to us through the Cross of Christ reconciles us not only to God but also to one another.

The focus changes from simply joy that "I am in," "I belong to God," to a fuller joy that "we are all included with one another as belonging to God"

This focus on the atonement achieving our reconciliation is at the heart of the ability to be reconciled to one another, just as much as it is at the heart of being reconciled to God. That means we need to preach the application of the atonement with this in view, just as much as we preach the application of the atonement with our personal reconciliation to God in view.

The individualistic/personal grid of much of the western approach, as the settled, accepted practice over the past several hundred years of thinking has led us to believe we can preach the good news of the Gospel to the nations in a way that leaves them ethnically or socio-economically divided within the confines of their own social group also as a collection of individuals. In turn, this has left us with incredible blinders in place that allow us to look right past the astounding teaching in Ephesians 2 that the atonement has a central application to our reconciliation with one another (as well as ignoring the high priestly prayer of Jesus in John 17 and all the other countless passages that call for unity in the now reconciled body of Christ).

This passage, unequivocally, tells us a central part of the work of the Cross was re-uniting divided humanity in Christ Jesus. And yet this is often, stunningly, completely absent in the preaching of the Cross in many reformed and evangelical circles.

Eph 3 The church: as the reconciled, just-righteous community of God's people is the center piece of God's revelation of his multifaceted wisdom to the power structures- seen and unseen- of the world.

A. 3:1, 14-21

Ephesians 3:1 For this reason I, Paul, a prisoner for Christ Jesus on behalf of you Gentiles-..... ¹⁴ For this reason I bow my knees before the Father, ¹⁵ from whom every family in heaven and on earth is named, ¹⁶ that according to the riches of his glory he may grant you to be strengthened with power through his Spirit in your inner being, ¹⁷ so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith- that you, being rooted and grounded in love, ¹⁸ may have strength to comprehend with all the saints what is the breadth and length and height and depth, ¹⁹ and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, that you may be filled with all the fullness of God. ²⁰ Now to him who is able to do far more abundantly than all that we ask or think, according to the power at work within us, ²¹ to

him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, forever and ever. Amen.”

Paul’s prayer, which he interrupts in 3:2-13 to emphasize the entire nature of his ministry being centered around the one-reconciled-people-of-God, is for strength to see what God is doing through the church, in the world, in this great reconciliation and righteousness-justice work of Christ.

Paul’s prayer is telling in many ways. It reveals just how humanly impossible it is to see this reconciled expression of the church come to reality without a basic, foundational reliance on the presence of Christ and the power of God to see past all of the obstacles and barriers that the world, Satan and our own flesh put in our way to enter into this. But the promise, in context, is that God can do more than all we ask or imagine in bringing this reconciled, righteous-just community to expression.

- B. Eph 3:2-13 The reconciled, righteous-just church is the light of the world in Christ to the multitude of nations and to the power structures of the world, as well as the unseen powers of spiritual forces

Ephesians 3:2-13 ² assuming that you have heard of the stewardship of God's grace that was given to me for you, ³ how the mystery was made known to me by revelation, as I have written briefly. ⁴ When you read this, you can perceive my insight into the mystery of Christ, ⁵ which was not made known to the sons of men in other generations as it has now been revealed to his holy apostles and prophets by the Spirit. ⁶ This mystery is that the Gentiles are fellow heirs, members of the same body, and partakers of the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel. ⁷ Of this gospel I was made a minister according to the gift of God's grace, which was given me by the working of his power. ⁸ To me, though I am the very least of all the saints, this grace was given, to preach to the Gentiles the unsearchable riches of Christ, ⁹ and to bring to light for everyone what is the plan of the mystery hidden for ages in God who created all things, ¹⁰ so that through the church the manifold wisdom of God might now be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly places. ¹¹ This was according to the eternal purpose that he has realized in Christ Jesus our Lord, ¹² in whom we have boldness and access with confidence through our faith in him. ¹³ So I ask you not to lose heart over what I am suffering for you, which is your glory.

Colossians 2:8-15 ⁸ See to it that no one takes you captive by philosophy and empty deceit, according to human tradition, according to the elemental spirits of the world, and not according to Christ. ⁹ For in him the whole fullness of deity dwells bodily, ¹⁰ and you have been filled in him, who is the head of all rule and authority. ¹¹ In him also you were circumcised with a circumcision made without hands, by putting off the body of the flesh,

by the circumcision of Christ, ¹² having been buried with him in baptism, in which you were also raised with him through faith in the powerful working of God, who raised him from the dead. ¹³ And you, who were dead in your trespasses and the uncircumcision of your flesh, God made alive together with him, having forgiven us all our trespasses, ¹⁴ by canceling the record of debt that stood against us with its legal demands. This he set aside, nailing it to the cross. ¹⁵ He disarmed the rulers and authorities and put them to open shame, by triumphing over them in him.

1. When we lose the thrust of Paul's argument that God has chosen a people for himself who are to manifest his holiness-justice, as exhibited in Jesus the Messiah, in a blameless way in this world, specifically as the reconciled-to-God-reconciled-to-one-another-Spirit-empowered- body-of-Christ, living-temple-of-God, and we replace that with a more individualistic expression of all these promises that ignores both the practical justice-righteousness expression and the unity-reconciled expression of the local church, that in turn can lead to interpreting Paul's expression of God's intention "that now, through the church, the multi-faceted wisdom of God should be made known..." open to each of us vying for our favorite understanding of what that means.

- a. The limits of some of the current "reformed world and life view"

One of the most appealing expressions of this "multi-faceted wisdom of God" expression through the church is found in the teaching of Abraham Kuyper and many, many western theologians who have followed in his footsteps.

While there is no way to do justice to the breadth of this perspective in this address, one of the current, prominent marks of this teaching in the more individualized expression of the church is that the church is the place believers are equipped and strengthened in the glory and grace of God to then go out into the world, and each one manifest God's righteousness-holiness-justice-grace in their sphere of influence. As Christian doctors, teachers, lawyers, politicians, factory workers, etc. are faithful to be God's light in the world there will be some greater or lesser degree of the redemption of culture. And of course, though not always explicitly stated, the closer we get to the sources of cultural power and influence them, the greater the impact for God's wisdom to be manifest to the nations.

While there is so much truth in the mix of this presentation (and some error to guard against) that it would be foolish to dismiss the biblical merits of this appeal, it still

comes up short of Paul's description in Ephesians 2:19-3:20 that it is the church herself, the living organism of the body of Christ as this reconciled, fellowshiping, righteousness-justice practicing community of God's people who love one another and who love the broken world that is the pinnacle of the expression of God's wisdom to the world.

- b. This does not deny the need for Christian lawyers, doctors, etc. to be motivated and directed by the glory of God and his kingdom righteousness in all they do. We would never teach anything other than that. However, the argument of Ephesians is that the only thing that can reach the full expression of that wisdom of God to the world is the body of Christ living as a fellowship of reconciled people- bringing God's compassion, justice and love to one another and to the hurting world.
2. How this reconciled-righteous body of Christ exercises a redemptive influence on the power structures of the world.
 - a. First we need to recognize what the "thrones, dominions, powers, authorities" etc. are that Paul refers to and their relationship to Christ.

Colossians 1:15-17 ¹⁵ He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation. ¹⁶ For by him all things were created, in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities- all things were created through him and for him. ¹⁷ And he is before all things, and in him all things hold together."

Paul's word that all things were created by Christ and for Him, and that all things "hold together" in him means that all these various powers and structures have their orderly expression in Him. They commence, consist, subsist, manage to survive, have their definition and order in relationship to the Creator

The powers include seen and unseen structures that affect each person's life. They are forces that are at work in all cultures and societies in one form or another and can include education; business; economy; governments; family; science; arts; the cultural authority of a community; philosophies of life; religions; angels of various kinds; the universe- stars, the sun, the moon, the heavens- the clouds, day and night; animals; human structures, anything and everything that seems like a "force" or "power" of life over us.

All these powers were originally created as good and were meant to be used to assist us as human beings to promote God's glory and goodness and carry on God's creative work

in this world, while we lived together in unity and fellowship with God and one another. When Adam sinned and men thrust aside their submission to God, the rebellion reached the basic created power structures as well.

Without the One, True God as the center of all things, these various structures all seek in some way, to become their own gods. They stand in rebellion against God and are given god-like status by two sources: demonic influence and the evil in the hearts of men. As men reject God, these other power sources offer themselves as the one, unifying, defining source of life. Of course they are ultimately all limited and unable to address man's deepest needs and his great plight of sinful self-destruction.

- b. The larger scope of the death-resurrection-ascension of Christ is that the "powers" will also ultimately be reconciled back to Christ as King

Colossians 1:15-20 ¹⁵ He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation. ¹⁶ For by him all things were created, in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities- all things were created through him and for him. ¹⁷ And he is before all things, and in him all things hold together. ¹⁸ And he is the head of the body, the church. He is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, that in everything he might be preeminent. ¹⁹ For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, ²⁰ and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, making peace by the blood of his cross.

This takes place in the "already-not yet" tension of the kingdom (see D. A. Carson, "Christ and Culture Revisited"); but an important question is, how? How, in the already side of the equation, does such reconciliation begin?

- c. The Cross of Christ as the paradigm of defeating and beginning the reclamation of the power structures of the world and universe Eph 1, Col 1:20

Paul tells us the deception and stranglehold of the power structures as they stand opposed to God are broken through the Cross. As many others have pointed out, one of the clearest statements of this truth is found in 2 Corinthians 2:6-8 where Paul tells us that if the rulers of this age had understood the Cross would be their defeat, they would not have crucified Jesus. Not because they wanted him to stay and become King, but because the cross actually led to their downfall. Their lies were exposed; the limits of their power was unmasked; and remarkably, his death led to the resurrection and his being enthroned over all nations and all powers.

Part of the call to the church as the body of Christ is to also take up our Cross. It is by means of confronting evil with good and a willingness to suffer and even die that the power structures of the world – seen and unseen- are always defeated.

This is precisely why Paul asks for the power of Christ's resurrection, in order to be able to enter into this task of taking on the suffering and death that are required to see resurrection life- possibly/probably not a reference to questions of personal assurance of salvation, but a reference to "in this way" seeing the resurrection life of God flow into this world (Phil 3:10).

At the end of Paul's teaching in Ephesians 3 on the wisdom of God being revealed through the church, Paul says, "I ask you, therefore, not to be discouraged because of my sufferings for you, which are your glory."

- d. These final pieces help flesh out a fuller understanding of how the church manifest the multi-faceted wisdom of God to this world.

It is the reconciled-righteousness/justice enacting-caring especially for the poor and oppressed- humble- resurrection empowered-suffering/cross bearing-Christ as Savior and King declaring- body of Christ that is the multi-faceted manifestation of the wisdom of God.

Certainly this definition can be improved upon (both in content and grammar), but it is our contention that these elements are essential parts of the definition of the church being the wisdom of God that have often been left out, of late, for much of the reformed and evangelical church. We have concluded we can be a redemptive, salt and light force in culture without reconciliation, justice and humbly taking up the Cross being major marks of the local body of Christ. And in turn, the influence of the church is diminished; not lost, but proportionately far less than what is should be given our numbers.

For lack of time, just a few final thoughts about Ephesians 4-6.

Eph 4:1-15 The unity and diversity of the body brought to focus and maturity of expression – "to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ"- through the equipping and unleashing of this reconciled people of God for works of service by the shepherds of the church.

- A. 4:1-10 The need for the diversity of gifting in the leadership and the members
- B. 4:11-16 Without reconciliation and justice for the poor and oppressed among us as one of the chief expressions of the gifting of God's people, we leave our people susceptible to the schemes of Satan, deceitful false prophets and the pull of the "powers" that stand opposed to God. Some form of a prosperity Gospel is the natural alternative to a church that no longer sees justice for the poor and reconciliation as a vital part of her calling.

We simply cannot reach the full maturity of the body of Christ without these elements present.

Eph 4:17-6:9 Practical expressions of reconciliation and justice in the areas of life most defined by division and injustice.

- A. 4:17-5:20 The first part of this passage reads like a condensed version of several parts of Exodus and Leviticus, basically saying, do not act in sinful-oppressive-unjust ways like the nations around you; instead, put on the new self, created to be like God in true righteousness and holiness. Once again, these terms must include the justice part of God's character of what this righteousness-holiness means.
- B. 5:21-6:9 In the second part of this passage Paul may not necessarily be trying to codify or justify or define the existing power structures of family, work, government and church. But rather, his main point being these are the main areas of life we need to practice this kind of justice and love, in the context of redemptive suffering, cf 1 Peter 2:13-3:7.

Eph 6:10-20 Spiritual warfare and the armor of God revisited

Is this not part of the strength Paul prays for the church in Eph 1 and 3 answered in Ephesians 6? If we put the armor of God pieces in the context of what has already been revealed in the rest of Ephesians (surely this was the immediate reference point for the churches who first received this letter) it might look something like this:

The belt of truth: the truth as God has revealed it, all things being re-united under the headship of Christ including all of us reconciled, restored both to God to one another

The breastplate of righteousness- Christ's righteousness over us, and through us; righteousness-holiness- justice in the church and the world through the gifted people of God

Readiness of the gospel of peace- to enter into all the most serious, broken places of the world and face the opposition and enter into the sufferings of Christ, knowing shalom will come

Shield of faith- to believe how "wide and deep and long and high is the love of Christ" and the extent of the atonement to usher in the reconciliation of all things in Christ.

The helmet of salvation—not so much about personal standing but more about salvation in the sense of predestined deliverance for God's glorious purposes

The sword of the Spirit- believing the word of God which penetrates the lies of the power structures, whether demonic forces or human structures of authority that oppose God

Prayer- that most humble tool of all that brings us into clear fellowship with God

All this armor of God empowering us to face the deepest brokenness of the world and see the healing of the nations!