

God's Plan of Reconciliation

Alienation

Ephesians 2:11-12

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Alienation

Scripture

We are currently in a series of sermons on Ephesians 2 that I am calling, “God’s Plan of Reconciliation.”

We live in a world of alienation. We see it in politics, in race relationships, in economics, in the media, and, of course, in religion. I typed the word “alienation” in Google search, and one of the first headlines to appear was, “Muslims in America increasingly alienated as hatred grows in Bible belt.”¹

The Bible, though written millennia ago, addresses the topic of alienation. The Bible addresses our alienation from God, and it also addresses our alienation from one another. The Apostle Paul speaks of our alienation from God in Ephesians 4:18 (“alienated from the life of God”) and of our alienation from one another in Ephesians 2:12 (“alienated from the commonwealth of Israel”).

The Bible’s answer to alienation is reconciliation. And this is the theme of Ephesians 2. The first half of Ephesians 2 depicts our alienation from God. Although the verb is not used there, this is what Paul meant when he described us as “dead in the trespasses and sins in which [we] once walked” and that we were “by nature children of wrath” (2:1, 3).

Today, we come to the beginning of the second half of Ephesians 2, where Paul depicts our alienation from one another. In particular, Gentiles are described as “alienated from the commonwealth of Israel” (2:12). It is hard for us to comprehend the deep hostility that existed between Jews and Gentiles in Paul’s day. Commentator William Barclay helps us get

¹ <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2010/sep/10/us-muslims-america-alienated-hatred>.

a sense of the deep alienation between Jews and Gentiles, especially on the Jewish side. He writes:

The Jew had an immense contempt for the Gentile. The Gentiles, said the Jews, were created by God to be fuel for the fires of hell. God, they said, loves only Israel of all the nations that he had made.... It was not even lawful to render help to a Gentile mother in her hour of sorest need, for that would simply be to bring another Gentile into the world. Until Christ came, the Gentiles were an object of contempt to the Jews. The barrier between them was absolute. If a Jewish boy married a Gentile girl, or if a Jewish girl married a Gentile boy, the funeral of that Jewish boy or girl was carried out. Such contact with a Gentile was the equivalent of death.²

This alienation was visibly seen in the temple precincts in Jerusalem. John Stott described the temple building itself as constructed on an elevated platform. Round it was the Court of the Priests. East of this was the Court of Israel, and further east the Court of the Women. These three courts – for the priests, the lay men and the lay women of Israel respectively – were all on the same elevation as the temple itself. From this level one descended five steps to a walled platform, and then on the other side of the wall fourteen more steps to another wall, beyond which was the outer court or Court of the Gentiles. This was a spacious court running right round the temple and its inner courts. From any part of it the Gentiles could look up and view the temple, but were not allowed to approach it. They were cut off from it by the surrounding wall, which was a four-and-a-half-foot stone barricade, and which Paul referred to as “the dividing wall of hostility” (2:14). On this wall were

² Quoted in John R. W. Stott, *God's New Society: The Message of Ephesians*, The Bible Speaks Today (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1979), 91.

displayed at intervals warning notices in Greek and Latin. They read, in effect, not “Trespassers will be prosecuted” but “Trespassers will be executed.”³

This, then, is the background to Ephesians 2. All human beings are alienated from God because of sin. In addition, the people of God were alienated from the Gentiles. But, even worse than the alienation was the resulting hostility – hostility between man and God, and hostility between Jew and Gentile.

The glorious theme of Ephesians 2 is that Jesus Christ has destroyed both hostilities. In Ephesians 2:16 Paul described how Jesus destroyed the hostility between man and God: “[That he] ...might reconcile us...to God in one body through the cross, thereby killing the hostility.” And in Ephesians 2:14 Paul described how Jesus destroyed the hostility between Jew and Gentile: “For he himself is our peace, who has made us both one and has broken down in his flesh the dividing wall of hostility.”

The result of Jesus’ destruction of these two hostilities is a brand-new society in which alienation has given way to reconciliation and hostility to peace.

But, before we examine God’s plan of reconciliation, let us look at our alienation, that is, at what we once were.

Let’s read about our alienation in Ephesians 2:11-12:

¹¹Therefore remember that at one time you Gentiles in the flesh, called “the uncircumcision” by what is called the circumcision, which is made in the flesh by hands – ¹²remember that you were at that time separated from Christ, alienated from the commonwealth of Israel and strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world. (Ephesians 2:11-12)

³ John R. W. Stott, *God's New Society: The Message of Ephesians*, 91-92.

Introduction

In his commentary on Ephesians, James Montgomery Boice tells a story about Harry Ironside. When Ironside was in his prime, this well-known Bible teacher (later to become pastor of the Moody Church in Chicago) was on a train going to a preaching assignment in southern California. As he sat on the train a gypsy came and sat beside him. “How do you do, sir,” she said. “You like to have your fortune told? Cross my palm with a silver quarter, and I will give you your past, present, and future.”

“Are you very sure you can do that?” Ironside asked. “You see, I am Scottish, and I wouldn’t want to part with silver without getting a full value for it.”

The gypsy replied very earnestly, “Oh, yes, sir. Please. I will tell you all.”

At that point Ironside reached into his pocket and brought out his New Testament. “It is not really necessary for me to have you tell my fortune,” he said, “because here I have a book that gives me my past, present, and future. Let me read it to you.” He then turned to the second chapter of Ephesians and read the words we have been studying: “As for you, you were dead in your transgressions and sins, in which you used to live when you followed the ways of this world and of the ruler of the kingdom of the air, the spirit who is now at work in those who are disobedient. All of us also lived among them at one time, gratifying the cravings of our sinful nature and following its desires and thoughts. Like the rest, we were by nature objects of wrath.”

“That is my past,” Ironside said.

The woman tried to get away. “That is plenty!” she said.

“I do not care to hear more.”

“But wait,” Ironside remonstrated. “There is more. Here is my present: ‘But because of his great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions – it is by grace you have been saved. And God raised us up with Christ and seated us with him in the heavenly realms in Christ Jesus....’”

“No more!” she protested.

“Here is my future, too,” Ironside kept on: “...in order that in the coming ages he might show the incomparable riches of his grace, expressed in his kindness to us in Christ Jesus.”

By this time, the gypsy was on her feet and on her way down the aisle, saying, “I took the wrong man!”⁴

Ironside’s presentation was, of course, from Ephesians 2:1-11, which we have been studying for the past few weeks. Interestingly, in Ephesians 2:11-22 Paul also spoke of a past, present, and future. In today’s lesson, we shall look at the past.

Lesson

Ephesians 2:11-12 shows us that we were alienated from God and the people of God.

Let’s use the following outline:

1. There Was Religious Alienation (2:11)
2. There Was Spiritual Alienation (2:12)

I. **There Was Religious Alienation (2:11)**

First, there was religious alienation.

It is helpful to know that Paul wrote this letter to the

⁴ James Montgomery Boice, *Ephesians: An Expository Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Ministry Resources Library, 1988), 75–76.

Ephesians in about 62 AD. The church in Ephesus had mostly Gentiles in its membership. At the time, Paul was under house arrest in Rome. About three years earlier he had almost been killed by an angry Jewish mob in Jerusalem. He had just returned to Jerusalem from his third missionary journey, and had reported to the church in Jerusalem the things that God had done among the Gentiles through his ministry (Acts 27:19). Several days later Jews from Asia saw Paul in the temple. They had previously seen Paul with a Gentile Ephesian named Trophimus in Jerusalem, and they supposed that he had taken Trophimus past “the dividing wall of hostility” in the temple into the area forbidden to Gentiles. They cried out, “Men of Israel, help! [Paul] is the man who is teaching everyone everywhere against the people and the law and this place. Moreover, he even brought Greeks into the temple and has defiled this holy place” (27:28). The Jews in Jerusalem seized Paul and tried to kill him, but a Roman tribune intervened and arrested Paul instead. Eventually, Paul was sent to Rome where, as I said, he wrote this letter to the Ephesian church, which was largely a Gentile congregation.

So, Paul said in verse 11, **“Therefore remember that at one time you Gentiles in the flesh, called “the uncircumcision” by what is called the circumcision, which is made in the flesh by hands.”** Circumcision had been given by God to Abraham as a sign of the covenant between himself and his people. Circumcision was a sign of membership in the covenant people of God. But the external physical rite of circumcision had come to assume an exaggerated importance. Jews and Gentiles regularly called each other derogatory names. Paul highlighted this when he said that Gentiles were *called* **“the uncircumcision” by what is called “the circumcision, which is made in the flesh by hands.”** Paul was driving

home the point that these labels now only promoted religious alienation. Further, in God's economy, it was not the externals that were important but the reality of the heart. And it is this heart reality that was needed by both Jews and Gentiles alike.

Religious alienation is rampant today. It is even rampant among professing Christians. We routinely plug people into religious categories, and then we feel smug and superior to them. Brothers and sisters, this is exactly what the Jews and Gentiles in Paul's day were doing to each other.

As bad as the religious alienation was, there was an even more serious alienation.

II. There Was Spiritual Alienation (2:12)

And second, there was spiritual alienation.

Paul went on to elaborate on the pre-Christian past of the converted Gentiles in the Ephesian Church. He noted five ways in which the Gentiles were spiritually alienated.

A. *They Were Christless (2:12a)*

First, they were Christless.

Paul said in verse 12a, **"...remember that you were at that time separated from Christ."** The Gentiles were without the Messiah. They were separated from the Messianic hope of the people of God. Paul said of the Jews in Romans 9:4-5, "They are Israelites, and to them belong the adoption, the glory, the covenants, the giving of the law, the worship, and the promises. To them belong the patriarchs, and from their race, according to the flesh, is the Christ, who is God over all, blessed forever. Amen." Out of all the nations on earth, God had chosen the Jews to be his covenant people. So, all non-

Jews, that is, all Gentiles, in their fallen and unconverted state were **separated from Christ**. That was also true of every unconverted Jew too. But, unlike the Jews, the Gentiles did not have a chance to know about Christ. Their religion was completely pagan, and they had no reference to the Christ.

B. They Were Stateless (2:12b)

Second, they were stateless.

Paul said in verse 12b, “...**alienated from the commonwealth of Israel.**” Israel was a “**commonwealth**” or nation under God. They were a theocracy and a covenant people with whom God had made a solemn promise that they would be his people and he would be their God. God had bound himself to Israel and he ruled over them. No other nation or state enjoyed such a special, privileged relationship with God.

C. They Were Friendless (2:12c)

Third, they were friendless.

Paul said in verse 12c, “...**and strangers to the covenants of promise.**” Paul was thinking of God’s first covenant with Abraham, from which the other covenants came. In that first covenant, God said to Abraham in Genesis 12:1-3, “Go from your country and your kindred and your father’s house to the land that I will show you. And I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and him who dishonors you I will curse, and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed.” God did not make this covenant with Gentiles; it was made with Abraham, father of the Jews.

God's Plan of Reconciliation

D. They Were Hopeless (2:12d)

Fourth, they were hopeless.

Paul said in verse 12d, “... **having no hope.**” The Gentiles were hopeless because, although God had planned and promised to include them one day into his salvation, they did not know it, and therefore had no hope to sustain them.

E. They Were Godless (2:12e)

And fifth, they were Godless.

Paul said in verse 12e, “...**and without God in the world.**” It is not that the Gentiles did not worship other gods. Indeed, when Paul was in Athens he observed the many gods that the Gentiles in Athens worshiped. In fact, he started preaching to them in the Areopagus, and said, “Men of Athens, I perceive that in every way you are very religious. For as I passed along and observed the objects of your worship, I found also an altar with this inscription: ‘To the unknown god.’ What therefore you worship as unknown, this I proclaim to you” (Acts 17:22-23). The problem with the Gentiles is that they did not know the true God.

And that is true of everyone today who has no personal relationship with God through his Son, Jesus Christ. People may be very religious, worshiping Allah, or Buddha, or whatever. However, everyone who does not worship God through Jesus Christ is as Godless as were the Gentiles in Paul’s day.

Conclusion

Therefore, having analyzed the topic of alienation in Ephesians 2:11-12, let us remember where we came from.

Twice in verses 11 and 12 Paul used the word “remember,” once in verse 11, and again in verse 12. Paul wanted the Gentile Christians to remember that they had once been alienated from one another, and that they had also once been alienated from God. Paul will go on in the next few verses and explain all that Christ had done to reconcile them to one another and to God.

We should also always remember that once we were alienated from God, and we were also alienated from one another.

This Memorial Day Americans take time to remember and honor the legacy of fallen service members who have given their lives so that we can enjoy the freedom of living in this great country. We never want to forget the sacrifice of so many on our behalf.

Paul wants Christians to remember their past alienation from one another and from God. And then he also wants Christians to remember that reconciliation with one another and with God has been achieved by Christ, as he said in Ephesians 2:13, “But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ.”

Let us remember and never forget. Amen.

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The Mission Statement of the Tampa Bay Presbyterian Church
is:

*To bring people to Jesus Christ
and membership in his church family,
develop them to Christlike maturity,
equip them for their ministry in the church
and life mission in the world,
in order to magnify God's name.*

Sermons by Rev. Freddy Fritz

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be found at:

1. www.tampabaypresbyterian.org/sermons.
2. www.sermoncentral.com/contributors/freddy-fritz-sermons-11181.asp.
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