

Foundations: Our Unity Together Ephesians 2:11 – 3:6

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INTRODUCTION

Division and disunity among people over their differences - we see it all around us in today's world. It occurs within and between nations. It occurs throughout governments, neighborhoods, workplaces, families, and frankly wherever people come together. And when absent, we know it can raise its ugly head any time. Since sin entered the world through Adam, it is one of the hallmarks of mankind.

Sadly, the church is not immune to its constant threat either. The Scriptures warn us repeatedly to maintain and fight for unity among God's people. God hates to see disunity occurring among His people.

As we continue the sermon series on community today, we will look into a passage of Scripture which reverses this natural tendency for disunity through the gospel of Jesus Christ. It is a foundational passage for thinking about and growing in our understanding of community here at the Chapel.

So let us turn to Ephesians 2:11. It is important to take a moment and touch on what Paul has taught so far in the letter. He began in chapter one recounting the spiritual blessings the saints had in Christ. These blessings were given to them by the Father and through Jesus Christ for the purpose of their being holy and blameless before Him, for their praise of Him for His grace, and for making known to them the mystery of His will in Christ – to unite all things in Him. This is God's purpose over the course of this thing called time. And regardless of what was going on around them and what is going on currently around us, God's plan was and is unfolding perfectly and right on time. God is calling out a people from all nations, blessing them in every way by Jesus Christ, and simply confounding the enemies of God – all for the praise of His glory. I hope you can see this in the mundane things of this life.

Paul then prays that God would give them wisdom and understanding in their knowledge of Christ. He also asks that they would understand in their hearts the hope to which they were called and finally to realize the greatness of His power toward those who believe – the very same power that raised Christ from the dead. And although this prayer is for individual believers, it is first and foremost for the church, His body which Paul describes as *"the fullness of Him who fills all in all"* (Eph 1:23).

Then in 2:1-10, Paul recounts where they and we came from – spiritually dead people locked in the prison of their flesh, obeying the desires of the flesh, and by nature being children of wrath – unable to move toward God and unable to even want to. The situation appeared hopeless and heading in only one direction, an eternity in hell and utter separation from God. This was until God acted. By His rich mercy and great love for us, He saved us by His glorious grace. He made us alive and raised us up together with Christ in the heavenly places – saved through the God given vehicle of faith – an awesome show of His grace. And oh, lest we forget, we contributed nothing to this in the form of works. Even the work of faith exercised was given to them and to us by faith.

And finally 2:10 says, *"For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them."* Something or rather someone new has been created in Christ which gives us an indication of what is to follow in our passage today.

SEPARATED (2:11-12)

So after stating how God is reconciling Himself to man, Paul moves onto how the gospel is causing man to reconcile with man. And Paul does so speaking directly to the Gentiles in the church or to the non-Jewish believers. We read in 2:11-12:

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— 12 remember 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.

In Identity

Now the hatred between Jews and Gentiles was well documented.

The Jews despised the Gentiles considering them to be dogs. They thought Gentiles were created to fuel the flames of hell. Do you remember the attitude of Jonah – an attitude which scarcely changed after becoming fish food? This hatred was only fueled by Gentile rule and occupation in their land.

And despite God’s redemptive plan to use the Jews to bless the rest of the world in revealing himself to them and ultimately bringing Messiah through them, the Jews missed it. In their thinking, God was for them and them alone. In their thinking, the Gentiles were of no concern to God, at least not in practical terms. The Gentiles were simply “*the uncircumcision*” – a term of derision and inferiority.

Now the Gentiles held their own animosity toward the Jews and any other people not like them. The Jews were considered “homicidal enemies” of the human race¹ and were simply part of the enemy barbarian class that was racially inferior to the Gentiles. To the Romans, the Jews were only trouble.

Paul distinguishes the two races by “*circumcised*” and “*uncircumcised*” with the circumcised being the Jew. And although Paul use these familiar terms, he is quick to point out that circumcision meant nothing – he calls it “*made in the flesh by hands*” – circumcision is simply an external matter. The Jew was not superior in standing before God because of physical circumcision. The Scriptures tell us that only a circumcision of the heart is what matters.

But at this time in history the Gentiles, relative to the Jews, were separated from God. Verse 12 characterizes this separation in several ways:

From Messiah

First, they were separated from Messiah. Until Christ came and His finished work began to be proclaimed, the Gentiles had no prospects or notion of a Messiah on the horizon. Separated from Christ, they had no anticipation of His coming nor were they particularly interested. Do you remember what that was like before the Lord opened your eyes to your need?

¹ R Kent Hughes, “Ephesians: The Mystery of the Body of Christ” (Wheaton, Crossway Books, 1990), pg 87

From Israel and the Promises

And the Gentiles were separated from the nation of Israel which had direct exposure to the one true God. The Jews had experienced God in the Old Testament and received promises rooted in belief and trust in Him. The Gentiles had received no such revelation much less any promises from God. They stood far off.

From Hope

As a result, the Gentiles had no hope. Life consisted merely of several decades of difficulty and trouble, pursuits of pleasure, and vain achievement ending in death – a death for which they devised a myriad of philosophies in how to cope with it; existence ended at death (nihilism), imagined after lives, etc. Life for the Gentiles contained no hope – “get what you can while you can get it. Besides, you only live once.” This hopeless philosophy sounds familiar in our day, right? And perhaps it even describes your own life...

From God

Furthermore, the Gentiles were separated from God – the very God who gave them existence, meaning and purpose. Oh yes, they were religious – man must worship something for that is how God created him. The Ephesians for example, worshiped the goddess Diana. But Diana and the multitude of gods the Gentiles worshipped were false – imagined and otherwise. They were simply devised in the image of the worshiper. And the best they could come up with was an altar “to the unknown God” (Acts 17:23). The reality for the Gentile peoples at large was a clear separation from the true God.

RECONCILED BY CHRIST (2:13-18)

Removing the Division (2:13-15)

However, the One True God sent Jesus Christ. And in Him, everything changed for the Gentiles. We pick up again in 2:13:

13 But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ. 14 For he himself is our peace, who has made us both one and has broken down in his flesh the dividing wall of hostility 15 by abolishing the law of commandments expressed in ordinances, that he might create in himself one new man in place of the two, so making peace, 16 and might reconcile us both to God in one body through the cross, thereby killing the hostility. 17 And he came and preached peace to you who were far off and peace to those who were near. 18 For through him we both have access in one Spirit to the Father.

By His Blood (2:13)

Through the blood of His cross, Jesus Christ had now brought the Gentiles near. Remember Jesus' response in John 12:20-26 when some of the Greeks sought to see Jesus right before He went to the cross? ²³ And Jesus answered them, “The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified. ²⁴ Truly, truly,

I say to you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains alone; but if it dies, it bears much fruit.

The Gentiles had been separated socially, culturally, and most importantly spiritually from the Jews and from God. But now like the Jews, the Gentiles had been brought near to God by the substitutionary and sacrificial death of Christ.

By Bringing and Making Peace (2:14-15)

Verses 14-15 tell us more. By His very being and His completed work, Jesus reconciles man to man and in this setting Jew and Gentile.

Breaking down the wall of hostility

Paul tells us Jesus has broken down the wall of hostility between the two. The cause of this hostility between one another was over the Mosaic Law or *“the law of commandments expressed in ordinances”* in verse 15. The Law itself and in how the Jews expressed it (rightly or wrongly) constituted a dividing wall. The Jews observed the Law (even adding to it) while the Gentiles did not observe it and did not even care. The result was hatred and deep division.

This “wall” of the law was even physical. *“In Herod’s temple there was a wall that separated the Court of the Gentiles from the rest of the Temple, and on that wall were inscriptions in Latin and Greek forbidding Gentiles to enter... They read: ‘No foreigner may enter within the barricade which surrounds the sanctuary and enclosure. Anyone who is caught doing so will have himself to blame for his ensuing death.’”*² If you recall from Acts 21:28-31, this was the wall that the Jews thought Paul brought Trophimus the Ephesian through in the temple in Jerusalem – an incident which incited a violent Jewish mob. The Jew and Gentile were literally separated by a wall.

However, the ultimate division was over law keeping. But now Christ had fulfilled the Law thereby giving both peoples equal and close access to God.

In Christ, believers are no longer under Mosaic law. The Jew could no longer make an exclusive claim to God through the Law they were given in the Old Testament. They would be treated on equal terms with the Gentiles before God. No longer would the two races be separated with respect to how they approached or knew God.

Believers regardless of national origin are under the New Covenant and its requirements which by the way, are far more demanding and glorious than that of the Law of Moses and which require divine enabling from the Holy Spirit.

Of course as is documented in the book of Acts, this truth caused many problems. And even among believers, there was much to work out over time. Remember what happened when Peter began eating with the Gentiles and the critical church meeting in Acts 15 to discuss the Gentile place in the church. This was a real problem in the early church – one that Paul is addressing here. The Law and its use in the New Covenant was a huge source of dispute.

² Ibid., p. 90

Creating one race from two

And in this wall breaking, Christ created one race from two and thereby made peace between Jew and Gentile. This is profoundly glorious. Mutually hating and despising each other for centuries, the two peoples were and are being unified into one race – some call this the “Third Race”. It is radical. For Jesus did not simply make Christian Jews or Christian Gentiles. No, He created a new race altogether. As said back in 2:10, “*we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works.*” Jesus created a new race where the old distinctions fall away and where racism, prejudice, hatred, and alienation disappear among His people. Jesus at the cross killed this type of hostility which naturally exists between Jew and Gentile and all people groups.

Jews and Gentiles were now to call and to treat one another as friends and as brothers and sisters. This coming together was not simply a cease fire whereby both parties agreed to be different and then function apart from one another. In other words, no longer be enemies but not be friend either. Rather they were meant to live and worship and serve and grow together. And in God’s grace and by the power of the cross this is what began to happen and is happening today among believers. But then again it is also not happening as God’s people continue to sinfully remain aloof from those different than themselves.

Made Equals before Him (2:16-18)

Paul now brings the two reconciliations (man with God and man with man) together in verses 16-18. Jews and Gentiles have been reconciled or made equals in the negative sense as well – a shared condition of being separated from God and in being enemies of God. The two shared their hostility towards God and together facing God’s hostility towards them. Here Christ ends the hostility in all aspects. Hostilities are over and the two peoples are considered one body fully reconciled to God.

Paul explains in verses 17-18 how this was done through the power of His cross.

In Their Gospel Need

First, both Jew and Gentile have the same salvation need – each need the same gospel of peace. Verse 17 puts all peoples, Jew and Gentile, on the same playing field. Jesus preached the gospel of peace to those far off (the Gentile) and to those near (the Jew). Preached what? The good news of sins paid for, forgiveness granted, reconciliation made between God and the person who believes and trusts in the perfect and all sufficient work of Jesus Christ at the cross. The war is over. It is new life for old. It is life everlasting. Whether or not the person found himself far from God with respect to the Law of Moses and being part of a nation to which God revealed Himself or not, the need was the same – he or she needs the gospel of Christ.

In Their Access to God

And then as that person enters into a relationship with God through Christ, we see from verse 18 that the power of the cross brings with it the same access to God in His Spirit. The new believer (Jew or Gentile) receives the Holy Spirit and therefore can enjoy a relationship with God. And do not miss it, there is only one way of access – it is through Jesus Christ. Peace has come in the person and work of Jesus Christ.

So Jesus Christ accomplished what no one else could – He reconciled man to God and man to man by dealing with sin at the cross.

Unified in Christ (2:19-22)

Paul now gives the Ephesian Gentile hearer and us, the outcome and outward manifestation of this truth in verses 19-22. In other words, for Jew and Gentile in Christ, here are the privileges thereof:

19 So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God, 20 built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus himself being the cornerstone, 21 in whom the whole structure, being joined together, grows into a holy temple in the Lord. 22 In him you also are being built together into a dwelling place for God by the Spirit.

In giving access to Himself through the Spirit, God has engaged all believers in Christ in three aspects of identity.

Into a Nation

The first is to be identified within a nation with a common citizenship. One thing that easily strikes me when overseas is that I do not belong in the nation I am visiting. Language, customs, and appearance are all different. And although I enjoy going, it is always good to return home and be among people with a common citizenship. Such is true among God's people – we are citizens in the kingdom with the same beliefs and way of doing things, aligned to the King.

Despite the stark differences between the Jewish and Gentile believers, they were now one nation.

Into a Family

But God does not stop there. He unifies Jew and Gentile in Christ as a family. A family is far more intimate than being fellow citizens. The Jew and Gentile and you and me are now brothers and sisters with spiritual fathers and mothers in their relationships. And it starts with calling out to God as "Abba, Father" or "Daddy". God is calling His enemies "friend" and "sons" and "daughters" and bringing us into His family – even Gentiles. And His will for us is to think of and to move toward one another in the body of Christ in the same way. Again, this is the activity God is undertaking in time.

Into a Temple

And in verses 20-22, Paul gives a third identity by showing God building a temple. There are key elements in this temple. First, there is a foundation built on the apostles and the New Testament prophets. The apostolic teaching was being laid down at this time by those Jesus had personally walked with and had handpicked; Paul, Peter, John, and others.

And there is a cornerstone. The cornerstone aligns the building and ties it all together. If it is inadequate, then the building will lack soundness. This is not the case in God's temple since the cornerstone is Christ and is perfectly sound.

There are stones in this temple as well. Each stone is made up of the saints and the members of the household of God, and by the Spirit, are being built together into a set-aside-by-God temple structure. Include among these wall stones are Gentiles. And being Gentiles, you and me are included as well. And finally, look in verse 22 who lives in this temple. It is God Himself! He is dwelling in the midst of His people. Can you see it? Do you see the glory?

The Mystery Revealed (3:1-6)

Paul explains how he understands this truth which he calls “*the mystery*” and summarizes it in 3:1-6:

3 For this reason I, Paul, a prisoner of Christ Jesus on behalf of you Gentiles— 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.

Paul actually begins to pray in verse one but then pauses to further expound on the mystery of Christ. Paul, the one-time Christian hating zealous Jew, was a prisoner for Christ charged to serve the Gentiles – the very thing God set Him aside to do. Paul was a walking embodiment of this great mystery.

A Stewardship given to Paul

Paul makes it clear in 3:2 that He was given this stewardship by God. Knowing His past and dramatic conversion, we know it was not something he would have asked for. In fact, early on he made every effort to go to the Jews with the gospel. But God had other plans.

A Revelation given to Paul

And in 3:3, he explains the mystery of Christ had been revealed by God to him and the other apostles and to the prophets. God had not chosen to fully reveal this mystery in prior generations although we see hints of it in the Old Testament.

Paul says, “I know of this mystery because it has been revealed to me as part of the stewardship I received from the Lord.”

It's Summary

And what is this mystery? 3:6 tells us it is that the Gentiles *are fellow heirs, members of the same body, and partakers of the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel*. Gentiles are part of God's plan to build His kingdom. Jewish believers – “awaken to this fact, accept and embrace them, and call them brother and sister”. Gentile believers – “you are full participants of this plan – on equal footing with all believers – embrace your Jewish brothers and sisters as well and experience the blessings of Christ together”.

Implications for Us – Reflect and Respond

What a profound truth. Or do we see it that way? Here we are in a small local church in southwest Ohio. 2,000+ years have passed. What do we do with this passage? Jews and Gentiles coming together – so what? We do not even make these distinctions between people anymore. I think I will just thank the Lord for expanding my knowledge of bible history.

Or we could go on and think about what God is doing between peoples throughout all the world. This is good and there is much worth praising God over. But it is distant. Rather is there not something here for us?

Well, the Scriptures say “yes”. Paul will go on in this letter to explain the implications of such a glorious truth. He will focus on relationships in the church and between husbands and wives, parents and children, and masters and slaves. Note the theme – all of these relationships are local and very personal.

As believers, we are people gathered in a local church community – sharing life together while serving, growing, and worshipping God in Christ together. And we all have personal and family relationships.

As believers, we are also a diverse people. We possess different backgrounds, ethnicities, experiences, ages, generations, stages of life, abilities, talents, health, strengths, weaknesses, maturity, finances, interests, temperaments...you name it. And this does not include the differences we imagine exist between us!

With this diversity there comes problems. In our ordinary interactions, we may not mix well. There are misunderstandings and different ways of doing things.

And with this diversity, comes temptations – temptations to fall into sub-groups and to avoid certain segments in the church body based on differences perceived or real. It is often not sinful or intentional but can be especially noticeable when conflict arises. It is often easier to retreat to the comforts of those most like us.

But this is where this passage hits home. In Christ we are declared to be one. And in this unity God calls us to harmonize our differences in Christ. The Scriptures give us the principles with which to work out the particulars between us over the course of our time together. But ultimately this comes by our being lost in the wonder and person of Jesus Christ. It overflows from a heart of gratitude over what He has done for us and continues to do.

Are there walls between you and other believers? – with those at the Chapel, a spouse, with a parent, or with your children? Repent of it, ask for forgiveness if needed, and move closer. And allow others to move closer to you.

This passage is foundational in our understanding of community. Remember we “*are fellow heirs, members of the same body, and partakers of the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel*”. Our natural differences cannot deny this truth.

But it is hard work. It is no wonder that Paul prays in 3:14-18 for the believers in Ephesus to be strengthened with the Spirit's power so that Christ would dwell in their hearts through faith and that in being rooted and grounded in love, would fully understand the extent of Christ's love towards His people. Let this be our prayer for today, our prayer throughout this series, and throughout living and serving together. May this passage always be the foundation for our thinking about community at the Chapel.

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