One in Jesus Christ

Bible Background • EPHESIANS 2–3
Printed Text • EPHESIANS 2:11–22 | Devotional Reading • EPHESIANS 3:14–21

Aim for Change

By the end of the lesson, we will UNDERSTAND Paul's explanation of Jews and Gentiles becoming one in Christ; EXPRESS pain and sorrow over the divisions within Christ's church and joy when divisions are broken down; and BECOME acquainted with church-unifying and church-dividing issues in order to devise strategies for addressing them.

In Focus

Marcus and Felicia held such high hopes when they married, but they could never have known that blending two families would be so difficult. Felicia's children from a previous relationship were crazy about Marcus, but they seemed to resent the things he did for his children during their weekend visits. Felicia felt that Marcus probably was doing too much for them, trying to make up for not being with them all the time.

Last weekend was the worst. Marcus and Felicia had to referee what was about to become World War III. Their two daughters were arguing about what to watch on the big-screen television. Felicia's daughter, Katrina, screamed at Marcus's daughter, Akira, "I don't care what you want! You're not really a part of this family, anyway. Your daddy lives with me!"

Marcus and Felicia had to explain to their children that, even though Marcus's children weren't there all the time, they were both an equal and important part of their family.

Christians often have similar problems with diverse members coming together as one. What are some of the divisions in the Christian church today? In today's lesson, Paul tackles the problem of division between the Jews and Gentiles in the Ephesian congregation.

Keep in Mind

"In whom all the building fitly framed together groweth unto an holy temple in the Lord" (Ephesians 2:21, KJV).

Focal Verses

KJV **Ephesians 2:11** Wherefore remember, that ye being in time past Gentiles in the flesh, who are called Uncircumcision by that which is called the Circumcision in the flesh made by hands;

12 That at that time ye were without Christ, being aliens from the commonwealth of Israel, and strangers from the covenants of promise, having no hope, and without God in the world:

13 But now in Christ Jesus ye who sometimes were far off are made nigh by the blood of Christ.

14 For he is our peace, who hath made both one, and hath broken down the middle wall of partition between us;

15 Having abolished in his flesh the enmity, even the law of commandments contained in ordinances; for to make in himself of twain one new man, so making peace;

16 And that he might reconcile both unto God in one body by the cross, having slain the enmity thereby:

17 And came and preached peace to you which were afar off, and to them that were nigh.

18 For through him we both have access by one Spirit unto the Father.

19 Now therefore ye are no more strangers and foreigners, but fellow citizens with the saints, and of the household of God;

20 And are built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Jesus Christ himself being the chief corner stone;

21 In whom all the building fitly framed together groweth unto an holy temple in the Lord:

22 In whom ye also are builded together for an habitation of God through the Spirit.

The People, Places, and Times

The Temple. The Temple at Jerusalem was made up of many courts. Paul focuses on the outer court, but there were four different ones. The outer court was where the Gentiles had to stay. A lot of money exchanging or selling took place in the outer court. Next, there was the court of the Jewish women. The women could only go as far as this court. Next is the court of the Israelites where the Israelite men would go and offer sacrifices. The inner court is called the "Holy of Holies." No one could go into that court except the high priest; even he could go in only once a year. Before he could enter, he had to undergo a cleansing ritual. The Holy of Holies is the place where God dwelled, separated from the rest of the temple by a curtain. The Gospels report that when Jesus was crucified, the curtain was torn.

Circumcision. It is the act of removing the foreskin of the male sex organ. In ancient Israel, this act was performed as a ritual on children, natives, servants, and outsiders on the eighth day after birth. In the Jewish faith, it was an external symbol of one's total and complete allegiance and devotion to Yahweh. Controversy arose in the early church over the circumcision of Gentile converts (Acts 15:13–18). During the A.D. first century, Jews frowned upon non-circumcision among Christians. Apostle Paul played a crucial role in settling the dispute. He determined that physical circumcision was not essential to Christian faith and fellowship. Circumcision of the heart through repentance and faith were the only requirements of the faith for non-Jewish Christians.

Background

Many barriers divided the Jews and the Gentiles in the ancient world. Paul devotes much of his attention in this portion of the letter to the essential oneness of the church. For Jews and Gentiles alike, Paul explained that keeping the law was not a requirement for salvation. Christ is the fulfillment of the law, making it complete. (Salvation cannot be earned through strict adherence to the law or by works. Nevertheless, we are not absolved of our responsibility to do what is right. Salvation by grace through faith does lead to good works; thus, no one had the right to boast about personal goodness.) There was no need for Jews and Gentiles to be divided based on Mosaic Law. Christ became and remains the peace of all believers. Therefore, there is no need for division and discord. By lessening the significance of ethnic and cultural identity, both Jews and Gentiles gained something far better and greater.

At-A-Glance

1. The Gentile's Status (Ephesians 2:11–13)
2. Jews and Gentiles Together (vv. 14–18)
3. One Church, One Foundation (vv. 19–22)

In Depth

1. The Gentile's Status (Ephesians 2:11–13)

Paul reminds his readers that before they were converted, they were Gentiles by birth and therefore considered outcasts by the Jews. The Jews despised them, as indicated by the fact that they were called the Uncircumcision. The Jews regarded their circumcised state with snobbery, as this signified that they were God's chosen people. They referred to themselves as the Circumcision. Paul corrects their sense of superiority by clearly stating that their circumcision was by human effort and therefore merely a physical act. What was really important, he told them, was circumcision of the heart.

While the Jews held on to a false sense of superiority about their status as the chosen, the Gentiles were without a savior altogether. The Messiah was promised to the Jews, even though Isaiah foretold that the blessing would flow to all nations. Christ was sent, "unto the lost sheep of the house of Israel" (Matthew 15:24). The Gentiles were "aliens from the commonwealth of Israel" (Ephesians 2:12). They did not belong among God's chosen. They were strangers to His promise considering all of God's covenants had promised blessings to the Jews. For all practical purposes, the Gentiles stood on the outside looking in without hope. But because of God's love, the former establishment was done away with. When the Gentiles receive Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior, God places them in Christ and accepts them through Him. Jesus Christ has broken down the barriers that separate all people.

2. Jews and Gentiles Together (vv. 14–18)

In the first part of chapter two, Paul traces the salvation of both Jews and Gentiles. The two groups held different perceptions of what it means to be saved. Here, Paul moves forward to dissolve their nationalistic and cultural biases to affirm unity in Christ and explain the necessity for unity. Through His shed blood, Christ broke down "the middle wall of partition between us" (v. 14). The barriers that divided Jews and Gentiles are now gone. Where there were two, there is now one. There is but one Christ for both the mighty and powerful and the lowly and powerless. For every race and culture, there is only one savior.

Paul describes Christ as our peace. When Christ came to us, He "preached peace" to those near and far (v. 17). In this instance, those who were near were the Jews. They had already

received a promise. Those who were afar were the Gentiles, those who had no covenant with God; they held no assurance of His presence or promise. This being the case, it is not difficult to understand why the Jews held a certain snobbery concerning their status as God's chosen people. Peace was needed to unify two groups that were alienated from each other. As our peace, Christ has created a new people, free from the limitations of imposed human boundaries such as culture, race, gender, education, social, or economic standing. All believers now have access to the presence of God at any time. This was in stark contrast to the Old Testament, when only the High Priest could go into the Holy of Holies, the place where God dwelled.

3. One Church, One Foundation (vv. 19–22)

Paul often uses the words "now therefore" when making a conclusion (see v. 19). He concludes that the Gentiles were in no way inferior to the Jews. Christ did away with all of that. The apostle lists some of the many great benefits available to all believing Gentiles, as they are no longer strangers and foreigners. Never again will they be looked upon as less than others or as outsiders. Now they are fellow citizens and equal heirs to the inheritance. Christians of Jewish ancestries have no advantage over the believing Gentiles. All believers are first-class citizens in the kingdom of heaven.

As they are now a part of the Church, they have become stones, or building blocks, in the construction of a holy temple. This new temple will also have a foundation, with Christ as the "chief corner stone" that bonds the temple together. This new Temple, the Church, is built upon the apostles and prophets of the New Testament. The apostles and prophets are not the foundation; Christ is the foundation. The foundation was laid in what the apostles and prophets taught about the Person and work of Jesus Christ. Christ is more than the foundation of the Church, however; He is also the chief cornerstone, joining the two walls that were once separated: Jews and Gentiles. In this new temple that Christ has created, everyone will have an equal place. When Jesus created a new covenant between God and humankind, He made a new people of God, one body—the Church.

Search the Scriptures

1. What were the Gentiles called (Ephesians 2:11)?

2. How did the Jews refer to themselves (v. 11)?

3. What barrier did Christ break down (v. 14)?

Discuss the Meaning

Because it is our responsibility to care for the Church of Christ and to continue to bring new stones, in what ways have we neglected our duties, both to the universal Church and in the local church?

Liberating Lesson

Some believers are determined to create cultural, racial, and ethnic barriers within the church. Many arguments and divisions have arisen over doctrinal issues. Some have attacked others as being unsaved for not adhering to certain standards. All believers should be careful to avoid ostracizing others. We should also be mindful of how what we do based on our preferences creates division. Christ desires that we engage ourselves in activities that draw us closer to Him and to one another.

Application for Activation

Think about who you are to people in your home, in your church, at your job, and in the community. Why is it important that you have good standing in all of these areas? How do you

devote yourself equally to maintaining your role as a follower of Christ (not merely a church member)? How do you try to hold yourself responsible to do what Christ desires of you? Think of at least one action or step you can take to show that it is important to you to continue to live as a disciple "in good standing."

Follow the Spirit

What God wants me to do:

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Remember Your Thoughts

Special insights I have learned:

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Sources:

Butler, Trent, ed. *Holman Bible Dictionary*, Nashville, TN: Holman Bible Publishers, 1991.

McCalep, George O. *Growing Up to the Head*. Lithonia, GA: Orman Press, 1997.

New Testament Greek Lexicon. Bible Study Tools.com. http://www.biblestudytools.com/lexicons/greek/ (accessed October 18, 2011).

Say It Correctly

Circumcision. sir-kuhm-**SIZH**-uhn.
Enmity. **EN**-mi-tee.

Daily Bible Readings

MONDAY
Reviving the Humble and the Contrite
(Isaiah 57:14–19)

TUESDAY
Building on the True Foundation
(1 Corinthians 3:10–16)

WEDNESDAY
Sharing in the Promise
(Ephesians 3:1–6)

THURSDAY
Making Known the Wisdom of God
(Ephesians 3:7–13)

FRIDAY
Praying for Spiritual Power
(Ephesians 3:14–21)

SATURDAY
Discovering the Gift of Salvation
(Ephesians 2:1–10)

SUNDAY
Discovering Our Oneness in Christ
(Ephesians 2:11–22)