

GOD'S POWER CHANGES RELATIONSHIPS

Ephesians 2:11-22

If you were to ask people what the Bible is all about, many would tell you that it is about God. While that is true, it is also a book about life and truth and the Source of life and truth. We have often noted that the Bible is about relationships. The most obvious relationship that is addressed in the Scriptures is that between God and man. We also find that the relationships we have with other people are addressed. Early on in the development of the creation account the relationship of man with the created physical world was addressed. The least obvious relationship that the Word of God speaks about is the relationship a person has with himself.

As with so many things, we can find that relationships can be all over the map as to whether they are healthy or unhealthy. Our behavior toward God, others, the environment and ourselves could be any of the following: Attack, Avoid, Abide, Accept, Advocate. These behaviors are simply expressions of the condition of the relationships we have.

Attack: war, destruction, rebellion, physical barriers, hatred

Avoid: distrust, separation

Abide: do no harm, ambivalence

Accept: Superficial helpfulness, crisis response

Advocate: Take initiative to cooperate, build up, interact, love

What are the contributing factors that determine where (on the “A” scale) people might find themselves? Most of the things that come to mind could probably be lumped together in a general description of “differences and similarities.” Humans are very creative in identifying distinctions or differences we may have among ourselves. For some, there is no distinction too small to be an excuse for negative attitudes, separation, and hostility toward others.

The early church found itself having to deal with differences of various backgrounds of those who were in the Body of Christ. The most significant issue that Paul faced was the differences of Israelites and Gentiles.

In the grand scheme of the overall letter, the second half of chapter two could be called a digression. Paul went into a “then-now” discussion of the contrasts of the former life (then) and the new life (now). D. A. Carson of Trinity Evangelical Divinity School notes that Ephesians is the crown of Paul’s theological writing and the second half of chapter two could be considered the central jewel in the crown.

In brief, the passage tells us how God has begun the cosmic reconciliation which was his eternal plan (1:9–10). There are two important dimensions within this. Verses 11–15 focus primarily on how in Christ the great barrier between Jews and Gentiles was removed, and the Gentiles united with believing *Israel*. We might call this ‘horizontal reconciliation’. Verses 16–22, have a different emphasis, however; they explain how both Jew and Gentile are brought *to God* (16–17), given access to him (18), and made into the heavenly temple indwelt by him (19–22). We may call this ‘vertical reconciliation’. (New Bible Commentary by D. A. Carson)

Brought Together 2:11-13

¹¹ Therefore remember that formerly you, the Gentiles in the flesh, who are called “Uncircumcision” by the so-called “Circumcision,” *which is performed in the flesh by human hands*—¹² *remember that you were at that time separate from Christ, excluded from the commonwealth of Israel, and strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world.* ¹³ *But now in Christ Jesus you who formerly were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ.* Ephesians 2:11-13 (NASB95)

Before Christ came, the majority of the world had no hope for salvation. They were not

aware that God was working in the affairs of man and they had no token of a yet-to- come salvation such as the Jews had. There was a definite separation between the Jews and the Gentiles.

Salvation has many facets. We typically concentrate on the individual, personal side of salvation in which we are reconciled to God in a one-on-one transaction that results in being born again and being made alive in Jesus Christ. This aspect of our salvation addresses only one part of the alienation that results from being "lost." In addition to being alienated from God we are also alienated from each other and the reconciliation that is being worked in us is sufficient to overcome the separation between people. The fact that there is still so much conflict between people in the world today is evidence that the majority of mankind is lost and has not been reconciled to God.

In their lost condition people look for and even create distinctions so that alienation is reinforced rather than eliminated. The easiest distinctions that are exploited by the devil are those that result from birth. Race is a good example of that. That is a good one to exploit because a person really can't do anything to eliminate the distinction. If that distinction is not available, then we create artificial means to keep up the alienation. The Jews practiced circumcision and most of the rest of the world did not. So among the Semitic peoples of the world, this became the distinctive difference by which to foster alienation. We do the same thing in our own society. Economic status, education, profession, region of the country – you name it and we can make an issue of it.

The tragedy in the case of the Jew - Gentile separation was that God's purpose of reconciling man to Himself was to come through the children of Israel; but, the human tendency to separate and alienate had shut off most of the world from knowing God and benefitting from the promise of salvation.

All the practices and rituals of the religion of Israel were physical, symbolic representations of what God was doing (or would do) spiritually. The physical practices that transitioned into spiritual reality were culminated in one event. That event was the coming of God Himself in human flesh and His being offered up as the perfect sacrifice for sin. In the past, the blood of animals was used in the atonement ritual to symbolize forgiveness and cleansing necessary for the people to be reconciled to God. In the death of Christ a "once and for all" sacrifice was made to provide the forgiveness and cleansing for all who would believe and accept the provision. The provision was what the Jews needed and it was what the Gentiles needed. In God's sight, both were alike in their need. The Jews should have had an advantage of being able to better understand what God was doing since all their past practices pointed to what God did in Christ Jesus.

Alienation is caused by emphasizing our differences. If we can find a point of commonality that is so overwhelmingly more important than any differences, then we can be brought together. This is exactly what we find in the work of the cross.

Joined Together 2:14-18

¹⁴ For He Himself is our peace, who made both *groups into* one and broke down the barrier of the dividing wall, ¹⁵ by abolishing in His flesh the enmity, *which is* the Law of commandments *contained* in ordinances, so that in Himself He might make the two into one new man, *thus* establishing peace, ¹⁶ and might reconcile them both in one body to God through the cross, by it having put to death the enmity. ¹⁷ AND HE CAME AND PREACHED PEACE TO YOU WHO WERE FAR AWAY, AND PEACE TO THOSE WHO WERE NEAR; ¹⁸ for through Him we both have our access in one Spirit to the Father. Ephesians 2:14-18 (NASB95)

God's plan for salvation recognized that all mankind, both Jew and Gentile, had need of salvation and that there was one remedy for all. Therefore, both groups find commonalty in this remedy which is found in the blood of Jesus Christ. This is the work of "atonement." The blood of the Perfect Sacrifice provides a covering for our sins and our identification with the death of Jesus on the Cross puts our "old life," which is the source of the differences out of the way and we find unity in the "new life" that is in Christ. In Christ we find a common route to God. The Holy Spirit draws both the Jew and the Gentile to God through Jesus Christ.

This drawing to God and the making of peace with God is often termed reconciliation (see vs. 16). It is interesting to note that the Greek word translated "reconcile" means to be changed or exchanged completely. This is what the new birth is all about. We are given a new nature, not of Adam but of Jesus Christ. Both Jew and Gentile, by being in Christ, become part of the new people of God. These are the "spiritual Israel" and to them all the promises of God belong.

The Jews emphasized the uniqueness of their ceremonial and dietary laws as a point to separate or to distinguish themselves from other people. The moral law the Jews had (no stealing, no killing, no adultery, no envy, obey parents) was common in other societies. What Christ abolished in His death were all the ordinances of ritualistic observances that pointed to the coming of the Messiah and His substitutionary death. Once He had accomplished and fulfilled that promise, then the ritual and ceremony were no longer needed.

The way to God would be through faith in the fact that Jesus paid the penalty for sin for everyone – so that everyone who came to God was in one group or one body. Since the differences were abolished, then the cause of possible alienation was eliminated. As Paul pointed out, God the Holy Spirit is the agent for drawing us to God the Father and everyone must come by way of the cross of God the Son. There is no other way.

Built Together 2:19-22

¹⁹ So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are fellow citizens with the saints, and are of God's household, ²⁰ having been built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus Himself being the corner stone, ²¹ in whom the whole building, being fitted together, is growing into a holy temple in the Lord, ²² in whom you also are being built together into a dwelling of God in the Spirit. Ephesians 2:19-22 (NASB95)

Paul used pictures to portray the church. The first is that the church is composed of citizens of a kingdom that is made of those who have been set apart for the service of God. When Paul told these people they were fellow citizens with the saints, he was referring to the faithful of Israel as the saints. Gentile Christians enjoy the same citizenship as the Jewish faithful. Beyond being citizens, we are even closer to God. It is as if we are living in His house. This closeness to God sets us apart. We are to be separated from the world and separated unto God. The distinctive characteristics that mark us as being separate are "holiness and purity." These differences will cause the world to be alienated from us but it will bring unity in the church and with God Himself. Being members of the household of God means we have certain responsibilities for service in support of the operation of the household (which is another area that could be explored at some other time).

Question: How do we in the church overcome the alienation that this new distinctiveness produces with the unsaved world so that we can accomplish God's purposes as stated in the Great Commission? The answer is simply that we have to take the same position toward the world that God takes. For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whosoever believes on Him should not perish but have everlasting life (John 3:16).

Paul changed the picture from **citizenry** to a **building** that is the temple of God. The Gentiles and Jews are being built upon the foundation of the faithful of physical Israel (the Prophets) and that small group of men who were personally disciplined by Jesus (the Apostles). The most important part of any foundation is the main cornerstone since it is from this that all else is measured. Our main cornerstone and our point of reference is Jesus Himself. To the Jews, the Temple was the place where God was dwelling and it was a strong symbol of separation between Jews and Gentiles. Paul shed new light on the concept of where God dwells by showing that "all of us together in the church" are part of the Temple of God. You see, God inhabits the church and as we join together with all the saints we find the fullness of God's presence not in ourselves alone but in the church corporate, the new fellowship.

The message of unity comes through in Paul's letter to the Gentiles. Some had thought that the Gentile Christians were "second-class citizens" in the Kingdom of God. Not so! All are citizens of the Kingdom and even members of God's own household.

The Temple where the Jews worshiped and where they believed God was dwelling was a strong symbol of the separation between Jews and Gentiles. Paul uses the idea of the Temple as God's dwelling place to show that all Christians together are part of that Temple of God. The chief corner stone is Jesus and is our point of reference. He is the one Who is the main focus. All of us together are growing into a holy temple in the Lord.

As we realize that God inhabits us as individuals and as a church, then we will focus on Him and what He wants rather than the petty differences and selfish things that drive us apart. This is the result of having peace with God and the peace of God which makes possible having peace with each other.