

Can't We All Just Get Along?

Ephesians 2:11-22

In March, the serenity of the Spring Haven Retirement Community in Florida was disrupted over a nasty incident at the salad bar. Mealtime turned ugly after 86-year-old William Hocker complained to 62-year-old Lee Thoss about picking through the lettuce. Name-calling soon gave way to punching and the police were summoned. One resident was bitten in his attempt to stop the fight, another knocked down.

I am reminded of the memorable question of Rodney King, who, in the aftermath of the 1992 L.A. riots asked, "Can't we all just get along?" I am compelled to answer, "No, probably not, at least, not by our own resources." The fallen people of this world can never get along because with the Fall came fear, pride and selfishness. Sinful people simply lack the stuff within them to get along.

Has the human race ever just got along? On some level, social or global, there have always been and always will be "wars and rumors of war" (Matthew 24:6). On those occasions when men do manage to get along for a time, it is usually because they have some common interest for doing so. Once that common interest ceases to exist, or, once keeping the peace demands significant sacrifice, compromise or surrender, our prospects for continuing to get along become very bleak.

That sounds terribly cynical. It shouldn't. Man has a warring nature, and the origin of that nature is sin. As with any malady, a cause must be identified before a cure can be found. Christ is that cure, but if the Church is going to rise up in these bitterly divided and dangerous days to administer the healing balm of Christ to a sick and tainted world, it will only be after we have unambiguously reaffirmed our position that hope does abound, but only in the blood and righteousness of Jesus.

The first century world was every bit as divided as is our modern age. The Greek despised the barbarian who was anyone that did not speak Greek and was unaffected by Greek thought. Management was severe, and labor was lazy. Men oppressed women, and women fought against God-ordained roles in response. Fathers and sons struggled to get along. Not much has changed.

Nowhere was the division between people more acute or the bitterness more intense than between Jews and Gentiles. For a Jew, to assist a Gentile woman in child-birth violated rabbinical teaching. If a Jew married a Gentile, a Jewish family might conduct a funeral service for that family member so as to write him or her off as dead. Now that's what I call "driving a point home." One might question a rabbi as to why God would have even bothered to create other nations of people besides the Jews. He might answer coldly, "The fires of Hell need a steady supply of fuel, don't they?"

It was against the backdrop of this hostility that Paul wrote Ephesians, his masterpiece on the restorative power of God's grace. Earlier in chapter two, Jesus was presented as the One who reconciled dead sinners to a living Father. Now, as the letter is developed further, Jesus is introduced as the One Who can bring people back together - races, classes, genders and generations of people. Our text addresses the remarkable repair of the sharpest divide of all, Jew and Gentile.

I. Without Christ, Hostility (11, 12)

¹¹Therefore, remember that formerly you who are Gentiles by birth and called "uncircumcised" by those who call themselves "the circumcision" (that done in the body by the hands of men) -
¹²remember that at that time you were separate from Christ, excluded from citizenship in Israel and foreigners to the covenants of the promise, without hope and without God in the world.

A. The Plight of Estrangement from God

Gentiles were often contemptuously referred to by the Jews as the “uncircumcised.” Circumcision was a mark in the flesh that set Israel apart from the other nations. To an Israelite, any notion of standing in a covenant with God began there. Paul was not endorsing the name-calling. He was just describing things as they were. He refers to the Jewish nation as “the circumcision” in a similarly derogatory fashion, adding, “that done in the body by the hands of men.” This was not because circumcision was insignificant, but because many who prided themselves in this fleshly mark missed the point that it was only a symbol of a heart that was likewise to be set apart for God.

Before Jesus came, Israel enjoyed tremendous spiritual advantages over the other nations of the world. Gentiles were “separate from Christ.” *Christos* was the Greek equivalent of the Hebrew “*Messiah*” or “anointed one.” When these first century Gentile readers saw this word, it was not Jesus’ last name as it seems to have become to moderns. Before Jesus showed himself to be *Messiah* or *christos*, the whole world knew the Jews were waiting for *Messiah*, a king from God to set up an eternal world Kingdom. Even when the Jews were oppressed the most severely, they possessed a vigor based on their expectation of a coming *Messiah*. Gentiles expected no such eternal deliverance.

The Gentiles were “excluded from citizenship in Israel and foreigners to the covenants of the promise.” They had no claim to God’s promises to Israel, a nation uniquely chosen by God to be blessed. Of course, God’s covenant with Abraham also involved a blessing for the whole world, but in their jingoistic pride, the Jews kept that detail in the “fine print” section of the covenant.

Gentiles had been “without hope and without God.” Most Gentile thought regarding the future was rather dismal. Gentiles were generally more licentious than were Jews, living for the present because they had nothing to look forward to. Their gods were just amplified versions of humanity; bigger and stronger than men, but also more self-indulgent as pleasure-seekers, meaner and with no tender interest in a man’s well-being. To the Gentiles, this life was all there was and they lived accordingly.

B. In Reality, All Mankind without Christ Shares a Common Plight

Israel had all the spiritual advantages in the ancient world. If anyone talked this way today, it would be considered terribly narrow-minded, but Paul’s Gentile readers were not insulted. Paul was simply reviewing what they already knew to be true. Of course, all those advantages would prove to be for nothing if a Jew refused to accept *Messiah* when He revealed Himself. That is exactly what many did. So, in the final analysis, their affection for the Law and their meager attempts to fulfill it left them no better off than the Gentiles who were never in a covenant relationship with God.

Nothing has changed. Apart from Jesus, division is inevitable because people are driven by pride, selfishness and insecurity. Pride, selfishness and insecurity in men have historically manifested themselves in oppression toward women. In pride, selfishness and insecurity, women have fought back, sometimes to the extent of undermining God-ordained roles for the genders. We speak of chauvinism and feminism as if they were relatively modern developments. They have been around since the Fall. All God sees in such “isms” is the absurdity of our pride, selfishness and insecurity.

Slavery seems to belong to bygone eras, but conflicts between labor and management abound, and there are usually no innocents on either side of a picket line. Generational conflicts remain. And, even with all our social progress, mankind still flies apart over issues of race, class and ethnicity. Is there a solution for the divisiveness? There is, but it is not in the resources of our humanity. Without Christ, people are selfish, prideful and insecure. Division is the norm. I know that sounds like a harsh view of humanity, but it is precisely our fallen nature that made God’s grace our only hope.

II. Through Christ, Healing (13-18)

A. Jesus Provided One Atonement for All Mankind verse 13

¹³But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far away have been brought near through the blood of Christ.

All those blood sacrifices carried out by priests operating under the Law of Moses were only symbols of the work of Jesus on the cross. The blood of animals never had power to atone for human sin. They foreshadowed a real atonement that would be accomplished in a heavenly temple when Jesus offered Himself to the Father for human sins. But even though imagery of Jesus' atonement was displayed to the Israelites, when His perfect blood was spilled, it was not only for Israel. The same blood that cleanses the Jew cleanses the Gentile. Peter worded it this way, "For Christ died for sins once for all, the righteous for the unrighteous, to bring you to God" (1 Peter 3:18a).

B. Jesus Introduced One New Law for All to Live by verses 14, 15a

¹⁴For he himself is our peace, who has made the two one and has destroyed the barrier, the dividing wall of hostility, ¹⁵by abolishing in his flesh the law with its commandments and regulations.

The real purpose of the Law of Moses was to show that Israel's failure to keep it vividly displayed that sinners needed something beyond law if they were to ever walk with God. We needed grace. Jesus abolished the Law when He brought us grace. He abolished it by fulfilling it. He met its requirements that defined a life of perfect human righteousness. He satisfied its penalties for disobedience when He died an accursed death in the stead of any who will come to Him in faith. Finally, He summarized it in a fashion that any disciple can understand. He taught us to love.

³⁴Hearing that Jesus had silenced the Sadducees, the Pharisees got together. ³⁵One of them, an expert in the law, tested him with this question: ³⁶"Teacher, which is the greatest commandment in the Law?"

³⁷Jesus replied: "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind." ³⁸This is the first and greatest commandment. ³⁹And the second is like it: "Love your neighbor as yourself." ⁴⁰All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments." - Matthew 22:34-40

These words became far more than just a memorable pair of adages. They became the royal law of Christ's kingdom, the principles that make the restoration of a bitterly divided human race feasible. Wherever Jesus is truly revered as "Lord," wherever He is wholly obeyed from the hearts of His people, then "he himself is our peace." He becomes the bond of unity that ends the battles of the races, the genders, the generations and the nations. We learn to love others as we love ourselves. We can place the needs of others on the same plane as our own. Without such love, oneness is not likely.

C. Jesus Created One New Race of Man verses 15b, 16

His purpose was to create in himself one new man out of the two, thus making peace, ¹⁶and in this one body to reconcile both of them to God through the cross, by which he put to death their hostility.

Greek had two words rendered “new.” One, *neos*, meant new simply in terms of age. A light bulb burns out, and we replace it with a new bulb. That which is new but not novel is *neos*. The other word was *kainos*. This meant “new in concept and quality.” After centuries of milking cows by hand, someone invented a “new” never-before-seen gadget that milked cows without human hands. That “new” is *kainos*, which is the word Paul uses to describe God’s “one new man.”

Today, Jewish Christians sometimes call themselves “completed Jews.” In a historical and philosophical sense, that’s accurate. Paul often took pride in his Jewish heritage, and he certainly drew on it in his teachings. But, *Ephesians* touches on what we might call more of a cosmic view of the Christian. In that respect, a Jewish Christian is no more of a “completed Jew” than a Gentile believer is an “enlightened foreigner.” In Christ, they are “one new man.” They are Christians. They are brothers to one another and sons of God. Paul uses singular language rather than plural, speaking not of new men, but of “one new man.” He seems to have in mind the singular body of Christ into which enter all races, tribes and nations of people. He seems to have in mind the Church.

D. Jesus Opened One New Access to God verses 17, 18

¹⁷He came and preached peace to you who were far away and peace to those who were near. ¹⁸For through him we both have access to the Father by one Spirit.

Through the Gospel, Jesus proclaims the very same peace to Jews (identified as “those who were near”) and to Gentiles (“you who were far away). Near to God and far away from God was how the rabbis contrasted native Israelites with all other nations. Their reference point was Jerusalem, the City of God. True peace became possible by virtue of one Holy Spirit, Who indwells all believers.

What Paul is talking about here may not only be our drawing near for salvation, but also our drawing near in prayer. Every believer in Jesus has access to God in his or her time of need. A priest is not required, because the role of a priest is to represent before God those who by sin are barred from God’s presence. But, because of the blood of Jesus and the ministry of the Holy Spirit, we have “access to the Father.” “Access” could be translated “footing” or “standing,” but the original word comes from a noun that described the person who introduced subjects to a king. That is one role of the Holy Spirit in our lives. He accompanies us to God. In some respects, He is our spokesman, for He gives divine utterance to our cumbersome prayers when we are unsure of how we should pray.

III. In Christ, Harmony (19-22)

A. We Are Members of One Household verse 19

¹⁹Consequently, you are no longer foreigners and aliens, but fellow citizens with God’s people and members of God’s household ...

An “alien” was a transient foreigner. “Stranger” referred to what we might call a “resident alien” who paid a tax to live in a foreign land, but had no rights of citizenship. Speaking of a man’s standing before God, Paul unambiguously asserted that there is none apart from Jesus. That is the position of the Word of God even though we all know that those are fighting words in this pluralistic and allegedly tolerant culture that grants equity to all religious beliefs. But, know that much of that same mentality abounded in Paul’s own age. He stood his ground about the exclusivity of Jesus to save. If we want to make any difference in our own age, we must stand our ground as well.

B. We Are Established as One Temple on One Foundation verses 20-22

... ²⁰built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the chief cornerstone. ²¹In him the whole building is joined together and rises to become a holy temple in the Lord. ²²And in him you too are being built together to become a dwelling in which God lives by his Spirit.

"Apostles and prophets," witnesses of the resurrected Jesus and those through whom God revealed His truth to His people, laid the foundation of the church. They proclaimed Jesus – God in the flesh, Sacrifice for sin, raised from the dead, ascended to Heaven, returning for His Bride. This harmonizes with Paul's similar metaphor elsewhere: "For no one can lay any foundation other than the one already laid, which is Jesus Christ" (1 Corinthians 3:11). The different emphasis in this metaphor in this context is due to the fact that Paul now chooses to liken Jesus to "the chief cornerstone."

Ancient cornerstones set the lines for the walls of a building. Without that line, building stones could be eye-balled, but one would likely end up with a very crooked wall, and the integrity of the whole structure would be compromised. Jesus is the cornerstone of His church. In Him, great walls of humanity that can never meet are perfectly joined together. He is the point of meeting for Jew and Gentile, male and female, slave and free, black and white, young and old, rich and poor.

If Jesus sets the lines for each of us, we can get along. If we are not each properly lined-up by Jesus, we can never be in a straight line with one another. If Jesus is not revered and obeyed as Lord, His people can never be united in His fellowship or in His work. He can only move freely among us if we are a holy dwelling place, cleansed of that fear and pride and selfishness that drives the old man. Only when we are aligned with Him can we be driven by love for and submission to one another.

In 2000, the Chicago *Sun-Times* carried the story of a couple in the midst of a hostile divorce. Six months into their case, a baby boy was born. His mother tried to name him, only to find her husband had gone to court to bar her from naming the child. Shortly thereafter, they began legal mediation to see if they could agree on a name.

The article concluded with the judge urging the couple to work things out, saying, "I would hate to see this thing turn ugly."

"Why can't we all get along?" We cannot get along because we are hopelessly selfish without the power of Jesus to free us from ourselves. The world **will** fight. Our first concern must be that the church yield to her King, so that she'll be one, and by that unity bear witness to the power of Christ.