Reconciled

God reconciles us to Himself in Christ, removing barriers of hostility between believers.

In 2012, my wife and I traveled to a country in southeast Asia for a brief teaching assignment at a seminary. In preparation for the trip, we were advised to keep in mind that the country’s government did not generally welcome Christians coming there to evangelize. My wife and I would need to be careful in the way we talked about ourselves and our intentions.

When we arrived at the country’s main airport, we came off the plane and immediately noticed our greeters standing on the opposite side of a thick glass barrier. They were waiting to drive us to the place we would stay during the assignment. I did not know how long they had been standing there, but their wait—and our check-in with customs officials—seemed interminable. We had to show our passports, answer questions, have our luggage checked, and then purchase visas to enter the country as tourists.

Finally we were approved to proceed. Our greeters—they were already our friends—welcomed us warmly and led us through the airport to the parking area. As we walked along, I could not help but notice how different my wife and I looked from everyone else. I stood a head taller than most everyone in the airport, including our friends. Our skin tone marked my wife and me as obvious outsiders, foreigners in the country. Culturally and legally, we were citizens of another country; we did not belong there except as visitors.

We had a very different feeling, however, when my wife and I met with other believers in the country. We could not have felt more welcome. Physical and cultural differences receded in importance; spiritual unity became obvious. My wife and I delighted in teaching our assigned classes and speaking to various Christian gatherings. We could sense the presence of the Spirit among those believers just as surely as we felt God’s presence in our home church.

In the Bible passage for this session, Paul addressed the external and internal barriers that separated Jews and Gentiles in their relation to God. Through Christ’s death on the cross, God tore down the walls of division between these two groups. In Christ, all believers are saved by grace, not by works, and are made into one holy family in the Spirit.
UNDERSTAND THE CONTEXT

EPHESIANS 2:11-22

In the first two sessions, we focused on Paul’s prayer for the letter’s recipients (1:3-23). In Session 3, we explored the apostle’s teachings about the nature of salvation (2:1-10). In those verses, Paul declared that believers have been transformed from spiritual death to spiritual life through what Christ accomplished. Salvation is God’s incomparable gift (grace) to sinners and is received only through faith. Paul concluded his initial teaching on the nature of salvation by reminding Christians that they have been redeemed by grace through faith for the purpose of doing the kinds of good works God had always prepared for them to do as His people.

In this session’s Bible passage, Paul focused on the theological implications of new life in Christ in terms of believers’ relationships with one another. Gentiles had previously been “excluded from the citizenship of Israel” (2:12). While people groups have long been divided from one another for multiple reasons (language, culture, territory, and so forth), no division has been as sharp and ugly as the distinction between Jews and Gentiles.

The opening book in the Bible reveals that God chose a man named Abram (later known as Abraham) with whom to establish a covenant. God promised to bless Abraham with innumerable descendants and with a place for them to live. Further, through this covenant nation, God would bless all the peoples of the earth (Gen. 12:1-3). By and large throughout the centuries, however, Abraham’s descendants (known as Israel) largely ignored their God-given mission. They misinterpreted their place as God’s chosen people and harbored a disdainful attitude toward all non-Jewish peoples (Gentiles). The hostility became toxic and mutual. In Jesus’ day, many Jews had such hatred for all Gentiles that they believed God had created Gentiles only for the purpose of having fuel for the fires of hell!

One dramatic symbol of the alienation between Jews and Gentiles in the first century could be found on the temple grounds in Jerusalem. An outer courtyard on which non-Jewish people could congregate was separated from an inner courtyard by a stone wall with gate openings. Inscriptions were posted along the wall that warned Gentiles not to enter the inner courtyard on pain of death. (One such warning sign, the Soreq Inscription, was discovered by archaeologists working in Jerusalem in the late nineteenth century and remains on display in a museum in Istanbul, Turkey.) Paul possibly had this dividing wall in mind when he wrote Ephesians 2:14.

In this session, we will consider what Paul taught about two hostile separations abolished by Christ’s death on the cross. One dividing wall that
Christ’s death abolished was the separation (in terms of salvation) between Jews and Gentiles (2:14). Another (even more significant) dividing wall abolished by Christ’s death on the cross was the separation between sinful humanity and the holy God (2:16). Paul made the case that the end of these hostilities, by God’s design, is experienced in the church (2:21-22).

EXPLORE THE TEXT

BROUGHT NEAR (Eph. 2:11-13)

Paul reminded Gentile believers that before their salvation in Christ they were without hope and separated from God. They were, however, brought near to God through Christ.

VERSE 11

So then, remember that at one time you were Gentiles in the flesh—called “the uncircumcised” by those called “the circumcised,” which is done in the flesh by human hands.

Paul opened this section of his letter with the phrase so then (“wherefore,” KJV; “therefore,” ESV; NIV), recalling the former condition of Gentiles before they had come to faith in Christ. One external difference between Gentiles and Jews could be observed in the flesh of Gentiles. Their males often had not received the visible mark of circumcision, a ritual act that was performed on all Jewish males at infancy—by law on the eighth day after a son’s birth (Lev. 12:3). This physical difference became a rationale for name-calling by many Jews. Jews proudly claimed the name the circumcised for themselves; they used the term the uncircumcised in a derogatory way to refer to Gentiles.

By calling attention to this practice prescribed in the Mosaic law, Paul was highlighting a hostile point of division between Jews and Gentiles. Name-calling based on external differences—think also of skin color, language, facial features, and so forth—raises barriers unnecessarily. After all, circumcision was merely a physical action done in the flesh by human hands. In other passages, Paul referred to a circumcision that truly mattered, spiritual circumcision of the heart (see Rom. 2:28-29; Phil. 3:3; Col. 2:11-13).

VERSE 12

At that time you were without Christ, excluded from the citizenship of Israel, and foreigners to the covenants of promise, without hope and without God in the world.
What mattered to Paul more than the name-calling or the physical mark (or lack thereof) of circumcision was the harsh reality that Gentiles truly had been alienated from God and from God’s people. Paul summarized this separation with five succinct descriptors.

First, Gentiles were **without Christ**. That is, they had no ethnic or religious claims regarding the divine promise of the Messiah to come. The Israelites (Jews) had been hearing of this promise through their prophets for many centuries. The Jews in Jesus’ day certainly did not have all the messianic prophesies figured out, but, as the Gospels show, they maintained an enduring hope for the Messiah’s appearance (see John 1:19-22). Gentiles, however, had been excluded from this hope.

Second, Gentiles were **excluded from the citizenship of Israel**. The Israelites were a covenant nation that God called into being (Ex. 19:6). Full citizenship in the nation was limited to biological descendants of the patriarch Jacob, whom God renamed Israel (Gen 28:13-15; 32:28; 49:1-2,10). Gentiles were not considered to be citizens of Israel.

Third, Gentiles were **foreigners to the covenants of promise**. God’s foundational covenant promise to Abraham had included a blessing for all the earth’s peoples. Yet the primary focus had been God’s promise to make of Abraham “a great nation” (Gen. 12:2). Similarly, God’s covenant with King David focused on the promise that his biological descendants would make up an everlasting dynasty of kings: “Your house and kingdom will endure before me forever, and your throne will be established forever” (2 Sam. 7:16).

Fourth, Gentiles were **without hope**. The world of the first century was filled with many pagan religions. Whatever help and hope people attributed to those false gods was empty. Neither could the power and glory of the Roman empire give people lasting purpose and hope for living—or for dying.

Fifth, Gentiles were **without God in the world**. Gentiles had no knowledge of the one true God. They had to make their way through life in the world without the possibility of having a right relationship with their true Creator. While God had revealed His majesty and power in the creation, pagans had taken even that revelation and worshiped what was created (idols) rather than the Creator (Rom. 1:18-23).

**VERSE 13**

**But now in Christ Jesus, you who were far away have been brought near by the blood of Christ.**

As Paul continued, he described the previous status of Gentiles as being **far away** from God. With the coming of Christ and the Ephesian believers’ embrace of the good news (**but now in Christ Jesus**), the situation for
Gentiles had dramatically changed: they had been \textit{brought near}. This change had not happened automatically for all Gentiles (or for all Jews for that matter). It happened only to those who were \textit{in Christ Jesus}.

How had this change come about? It came about \textit{by the blood of Christ}. Jesus’ death on the cross made possible forgiveness of sins for both Jews and Gentiles. This forgiveness brought believers near to God and therefore brought them near to one another. The barriers and divisions were overcome not because each group decided that relationships must improve. Rather, a mediator—Christ—came and made peace possible.

Christ has achieved the way of salvation for sinners, and now salvation is available to all who believe in Christ regardless of their ethnicity, language, skin color, social status, or any other external feature. All who receive salvation are united in Christ. One challenge we face today as believers is to resist erecting our own versions of dividing walls that Jesus tore down.

\textbf{EXPLORE FURTHER}

In the article titled “Atonement” in the \textit{Holman Illustrated Bible Dictionary, Revised and Expanded}, read the section on page 147 titled “Atonement and the Message of the Gospel.” How has Christ’s atoning death on the cross brought you near to God? How has it brought you near to other believers who have noticeable physical differences from you?

\textbf{PEACE DECLARED} \textit{(Eph. 2:14-18)}

Paul explained that Christ alone brings reconciliation and peace to all people. Through His sacrificial death, all believers have been reconciled both to the Father and to one another.

\textbf{VERSES 14-15}

\textit{For he is our peace, who made both groups one and tore down the dividing wall of hostility. In his flesh, he made of no effect the law consisting of commands and expressed in regulations, so that he might create in himself one new man from the two, resulting in peace.}

Paul could have written that Christ brings peace; instead, he wrote that Christ \textit{is our peace}. That is, only through becoming part of Christ’s body through faith in Him can any sinner gain true peace with God and with others. In Christ, the hostile dividing walls between Jews and Gentiles were
removed. By His atoning death on the cross, Christ made both groups one. Jewish believers and Gentile believers have now become fellow citizens in a single new community, the church.

Paul described the effect of Christ’s death as tearing down the dividing wall of hostility. In the background of these words, Paul may have been thinking about the literal wall that separated the courtyard of the Gentiles from the courtyard of Israel in the Jerusalem temple. In AD 70, the Roman army would destroy that wall along with the entire temple edifice. Paul declared that in Christ’s new spiritual kingdom (the church), the hostile wall of separation between Jews and Gentiles had already been torn down.

How was the spiritual wall of separation torn down? Paul explained that it was accomplished when Jesus gave His physical body over to death (in his flesh) on the cross. His sacrificial death was atoning in its effect by fully satisfying the law consisting of commands and expressed in regulations. In other words, what the Mosaic law demanded for having a right relationship with God and with others—think of the Ten Commandments—Christ had fully satisfied through His atoning death. Both Jews and Gentiles now had access to this new citizenship based solely on faith in Christ.

Paul had to address this matter more than once as he confronted situations in churches in which Jewish legalists persisted in demanding that Gentile believers must not only have faith in Christ but also must keep the Mosaic law in its entirety, including ceremonial regulations, dietary restrictions, and festival observances. In Colossians 2:16, Paul urged Gentile believers not to let anyone criticize them “in regard to food and drink or in the matter of a festival or a new moon or a Sabbath day.” Keeping such regulations was in no way a requirement for salvation.

On the other hand, while Christ’s atoning death satisfied the law completely on behalf of believers in regard to their forgiveness, the law remains a valid expression of moral guidelines for living as God’s redeemed people. Simply put, people can never save themselves by keeping the Ten Commandments; but once saved by grace through faith in Christ, the Ten Commandments remain a God-given moral and ethical guideline for Christian living.

In His death, Christ abolished something old (the dividing wall) and yet created also something new: one new man from the two, resulting in peace. Here the phrase one new man refers to the church as the body of Christ. Through His death, Christ took the two groups that formerly hated each other—Jews and Gentiles—and brought them together in himself in peace and unity. Notice that Gentiles have not simply been elevated to the status that Jews alone formerly enjoyed. Rather, something brand new was brought into existence. It was as though God took silver (the Jews) and bronze (the Gentiles) and out of them created gold (the church).
VERE 16

He did this so that he might reconcile both to God in one body through the cross by which he put the hostility to death.

On one hand, God’s purpose in salvation was to bring hostile groups together in peace (the horizontal dimension of salvation). On the other hand, His aim was to reconcile both groups to Himself (the vertical dimension of salvation). Both groups had been alienated from God in their sins. Now, through the cross, reconciliation was possible.

The Greek word rendered reconcile refers to bringing at least two parties into a peaceful relationship. By their sinfulness, human beings had positioned themselves as God’s enemies. In Christ they would be restored as His friends (see John 15:13-14). Paul was expanding his explanation of peace. When sinners put their faith in Jesus, whatever their status, they are made part of the one body, the church. Jesus paid the price of atonement through the cross so that the previous state of hostility was thereby put ... to death. Paul’s language was dramatic. One death led to another death! The death of Christ on the cross brought about the death of the hostility that had separated the created from the Creator.

VERE 17

He came and proclaimed the good news of peace to you who were far away and peace to those who were near.

When Christ came into the world as God in human form, He proclaimed the good news of peace—both personally and then later through His chosen representatives (the apostles first but also all believers). This gospel message was applicable to the entire world (John 3:16). Some who heard the message of peace with God were Gentiles, who had been far away from God and the hope of salvation (Eph. 2:12). Yet Jews had also been alienated from God, so the gospel was a message of reconciliation to those who were near. Only through Christ’s atoning death could Jews or Gentiles enjoy peace with God. Paul’s language was reminiscent of Isaiah 57:19: “The LORD says, ‘Peace, peace to the one who is far or near, and I will heal him.’”

In Ephesians, Paul was focusing on the new unity that bridges the hostile divide between Jews and Gentiles. In other passages, Paul declared that other barriers have been abolished through the death of Christ as well. He wrote, “In Christ there is not Greek and Jew, circumcision and uncircumcision, barbarian, Scythian, slave and free; but Christ is all and in all” (Col. 3:11). And in Galatians 3:27-28 he explained, “Those of you who were baptized into Christ have been clothed with Christ. There is no Jew or Greek, slave or free, male and female; since you are all one in Christ Jesus.”
VERSE 18

For through him we both have access in one spirit to the Father.

When Paul used the Greek term rendered access, he was thinking of a continuing reality. The term referred to an ancient custom in which a trusted official in a king’s court was responsible for introducing and accompanying any visitors into an audience with the king. No one was given access to the king without being accompanied by this royal official. In a similar sense, Jesus Christ was the only One who could provide access to God for believers, Jew or Gentile. We come to God through him.

It is not clear whether Paul used the phrase in one spirit as a reference to the Holy Spirit or to the spiritual unity Jewish believers and Gentile believers experience in the body of Christ, the church. In my judgment both views rightly point to the same reality. The spiritual unity of the church is, in fact, the indwelling presence of the Holy Spirit energizing the entire body of Christ throughout time and throughout the world. The Spirit intercedes for believers and helps us pray—approaching the throne of God boldly—even when we are at a loss for words (Rom. 8:26-27).

If Paul had in mind the imagery of access to a king’s court, that image faded into the background. It is no earthly king but rather God the Father to whom we have ongoing access in Christ. Jews and Gentiles alike can approach the heavenly Father together and in the same way.

EXPLORE FURTHER

Read the article titled “Peace” on pages 1233–1234 in the Holman Illustrated Bible Dictionary, Revised and Expanded. How does an understanding of true peace enrich your understanding of salvation? How have you seen peace in Christ bring reconciliation among different groups?

CITIZENSHIP GRANTED (Eph. 2:19-22)

Paul declared that all who believe in Christ have become citizens in God’s new covenant community. With Christ as the foundation, believers are being built into a single building in which God dwells.

VERSE 19

So then you are no longer foreigners and strangers, but fellow citizens with the saints, and members of God’s household,
Paul used five phrases in Ephesians 2:12 to describe the status of Gentiles before salvation in Christ. Here in 2:19, he summarized that pre-salvation status with two terms: foreigners and strangers. Both terms emphasize a lack of citizenship status. Apart from Christ, Gentiles had no claim to being in God’s covenant community. In Christ, however, the status of believing Gentiles had changed. They received full citizenship.

The apostle used two wonderful phrases to explain this newfound status in Christ. First, Gentiles became fellow citizens with the saints. The term rendered saints literally means “holy (or set apart) ones.” In the covenant context, it harked back to the divine promise given to the Israelites in Exodus 19:6 (“you will be ... my holy nation”). In 1 Peter 2:9, Scripture shows that the promise of becoming fellow citizens in God’s holy nation extends to all who believe in Christ. Second, believing Gentiles become members of God’s household. Regardless of ethnicity, believers become full-fledged brothers and sisters in God’s family.

**VERSE 20**

built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the cornerstone.

Paul further developed his portrayal of believers’ new status in Christ with an architectural, or construction, analogy. The temple in Jerusalem had long been the central symbol of Israel’s worship of the Lord. Paul declared, however, that in Christ God was in the process of constructing a new kind of temple, one not made with human hands (see Acts 7:47-48).

This new temple already had its solid foundation in place. The stability and endurance of the entire structure depended on the foundation, which in God’s new temple consisted of living stones: the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the cornerstone. In ancient architecture, the most important stone by far was the cornerstone, which was laid with great precision and care because all the other stones in the building must be aligned to it. Perhaps Paul was calling to mind a prophecy concerning the Messiah: “Therefore the Lord God said: ‘Look, I have laid a stone in Zion, a tested stone, a precious cornerstone, a sure foundation; the one who believes will be unshakable’” (Isa. 28:16).

Completing the solid foundation were the apostles and prophets of Jesus Christ. The word apostles literally refers to ambassadors, people who are authorized and sent out to act in behalf of a king. The term prophets emphasizes vision-receiving and message-bearing roles. Paul likely had in mind the men whom Jesus called as His apostles (including Paul himself). These authorized spokesmen also were the inspired writers of the New Testament Scriptures.
VERSE 21

In him the whole building, being put together, grows into a holy temple in the Lord.

In him, that is, in a faith union with Jesus Christ the Cornerstone, the whole building ... grows into a holy temple in the Lord. With the phrase the whole building, Paul was envisioning all believers—Jew and Gentile alike—in all generations until the Lord returns in the end time. (This description includes all of us today who are true Christ-followers!)

The phrase being put together draws attention to God’s work as the heavenly Builder who places each living stone in the structure as He sees fit. The verb’s tense indicates an ongoing activity. Likewise, the verb rendered grows (“rises,” NIV) is in the same tense, reflecting a continuing growth of the church throughout the church age.

The description of God’s redeemed people as a holy temple is instructive. In the Old Testament, God promised Israel that His sovereign name (presence) would dwell in the temple so that the people could worship and pray to Him there (see 1 Kings 8:29). In Christ and through the Spirit, God now promised to dwell not in a stone building but rather in His redeemed people. His law, which had once been written on tablets of stone, would now be written indelibly on the hearts of believers (Jer. 31:33; Heb. 8:10). The temple sacrifices, which once consisted of the blood of slain animals, have now been fulfilled once and for all in Jesus’ atoning death on the cross (Heb. 10:10) and are offered by grateful believers in their holy living (Rom. 12:1) and “the fruit of lips that confess his name” (Heb. 13:15).

VERSE 22

In him you are also being built together for God’s dwelling in the Spirit.

Paul’s concluding words in this section point to the reason God is building the new spiritual temple in the church. His plan is for the worldwide church to serve as His dwelling in the Spirit. God’s living presence can be experienced in believers through the power of the Spirit, who indwells them.

EXPLORE FURTHER

How does Paul’s use of the temple as an analogy of the church help you understand the church’s foundation? Its purpose? Its future? What is your role in helping the church carry out its purpose in the world today?