

MEMBERSHIP IN THE BODY OF CHRIST

Ephesians 2:11–22

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This is the fourth in a series of messages from the Ephesian letter. The first three chapters of Ephesians deal with our wealth in Christ, our assets in Him. Last week, in looking at chapter 2:1–10, we noted our past, present and future in Christ. As we looked at those ten verses, we saw how the Lord has applied salvation to us individually. Now, in verses 11–22, Paul moves beyond speaking to us about individual salvation to our membership in the body of Christ, the social consequences of the individual's decision that we have made. We've been concerned about our personal decision. God has been concerned about that, plus the fact that we're being placed with a whole group of people that He is gathering in the world in one body.

“Therefore, 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)—remember 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. But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far away have been brought near through the blood of Christ. For he himself is our peace, who has made the two one and has destroyed the barrier, the dividing wall of hostility, by abolishing in his flesh the law with its commandments and regulations. His purpose was to create in himself one new man out of the two, thus making peace, and in this one body to reconcile both of them to God through the cross, by which he put to death their hostility. He came and preached peace to you who were far away and peace to those who were near. For through him we both have access to the Father by one Spirit. Consequently, you are no longer foreigners and aliens, but fellow citizens with God's people and

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members of God's household, built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the chief cornerstone. In him the whole building is joined together and rises to become a holy temple in the Lord. And in him you too are being built together to become a dwelling in which God lives by his Spirit" (Ephesians 2:11–22, NIV).

I want to take a little bit more time in my introduction today than I normally take in introductions, but I think it will be helpful in looking at what the heart cry of the apostle and the heart cry of God are: that is, that there might be a unified people who name His name in the world.

My growing up years were in the Assemblies of God. I treasure those years, but I recognize too that my view of the church was limited. I thought that we, in the Assemblies of God, were God's favorite people. I had very little reason to believe that anyone else was getting to heaven. If they were, they certainly weren't doing it first class, like we were. We weren't the only group in the fifties and sixties that had that point of view. You could find it in other denominations and churches, such as the Baptist church or the Church of Christ or the Methodists or the Lutherans. We all had our kind of exclusive view that, somehow, we are especially the elect among the elect. Periodically, it crossed my mind that Baptists could be Christians. I met a few who were. I had my doubts about Lutherans and Presbyterians, because I really had never met any. I had no doubt at all about Catholics. All of them, to the last person, were apostates.

That's kind of how I spent my growing up years, in terms of my religious identification. The barrier began to break while I was in college. An Episcopalian minister spoke. Not only that, but it was a woman minister, and I thought only the Assemblies of God had ordained women. This Episcopalian minister, Agnes Sanford, spoke of the healing presence of Christ and the gifts present in the body. I didn't know that anybody in the Episcopalian church believed in Christ, let

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alone healing. It was a tremendous eye-opener. I thought, “It is possible that someone in the Episcopal Church is saved.”

I went on from my college to seminary. There, my exclusiveness was dealt an adverse blow. I wound up with a Presbyterian roommate. He shattered all the concepts I had. One day, I remember thinking of the experience I was having, of meeting all the people from different church backgrounds, and they were all Christians. I heaved a sigh of relief inside of me and thought, “The church is bigger than I ever thought it was.” What a novel thought. I’d never considered that the church was as large as it was really being experienced by me.

Then, about eleven years ago, when we came to pastor here, Evangeline was laying in the back seat of the car, complaining that Jesus was kicking her in the tummy. She had a stomachache. Since we had taught her that Jesus lived in her heart, she determined that it must be Him that was doing the kicking. I decided that kids don’t know a whole lot. My daughter didn’t know a whole lot about me but she knew me. And that became a window through which I began to look at the Scripture, where Jesus said, “Except you become as a child you cannot enter the kingdom of God” (Mark 10:15). Our relationship with God is not built on *what* we know, it’s built on *who* we know. As we grow in Christ, what we know will increase. But the foundation is that the Christian life is a new birth experience. Out of that, we began to pray for a heterogeneous church, where people could come and feel welcome and immediately join one another, in spite of their background. We’d have a common allegiance of loyalty to Christ.

Simultaneous to this, in the seventies, God was removing barriers everywhere. I noticed that new and more subtle barriers were rising. That some congregations and persons, to boast that they had no denominational affiliation—and therefore nonaffiliation or independence—created a new exclusiveness and separating wall. If you were aligned with a group or denomination of some

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kind, you were still under the bondage of man. Therefore, new walls were going up at the same time the Spirit was trying to tear walls down.

I struggled with this tension. This whole tension of walls within the body of Christ. I struggled with it, because on the inside, I am ecumenical. On the inside, I truly believe that the church of Jesus Christ is worldwide and universal, which is the meaning of the word “ecumenical”—that the church of Jesus Christ is not confined to the Methodist church or the Presbyterian or the Assemblies of God or Baptist or the nonaffiliated or the Catholics. That it embraces every one who names the name, who calls upon Him (Romans 10:13). I am ecumenical. But I also see the value of association. I see the value of association because of accountability, because of the joining of churches together to do outreach and missionary work, because of the training that many churches combined together are able to do. I think many of us, in this congregation, feel these same tensions of an inner spirit of ecumenicalism, but on the other hand, realize that there is safety to belonging, because of accountability and outreach.

With all of my heart, I wish that there could be one visible unified church in the world. Not one visible united church which gets together on the basis of compromising every essential of the church away in order to have unity. But a church that is able to be one visible church, built upon the doctrine of Christ and a love for the brotherhood and sisterhood of the family of God. I believe, with all my heart, in that kind of thing. The next best thing to it, if that can't occur, are people in organized churches that have that spirit in their heart. I recall when this ecumenical spirit began to break out. And, by the way, I'm not talking about the ecumenical movement, which talks about doing away with the deity of Christ and the like. There can be no affiliation with those who deny Christ. I'm talking about affiliation with those who name Christ.

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The Holy Spirit within us cries out for fellowship with others who name the name of Jesus.

There will come a day when all the walls of partition will be down. If not now, then. I think it's in that kind of a spirit that we must approach a passage like this. Paul is facing a division, even in the Early Church, that has separated believer from believer. That is: What are the requirements for admission? "You have to become a Jew first, before you can become a Christian." He also had struggled through a three to five-year period in his life in which he had gone to Jerusalem to bring an offering to all the Gentile Christians from the saints in Jerusalem. He had gone, while there, trying to be a Jew to the Jew. He had taken upon himself the sponsorship of four persons who had a vow. That meant he had to pay the expenses of their animal sacrifices. The animal sacrifice would be offered within the court of Israel. Around the court of Israel, there was a 6-foot high wall that had entrances. And at each entrance, in Latin and Greek, there was a sign posted, warning Gentiles not to enter. If they did, they could be subject to the penalty of death. Paul—trying to reach out to his fellow Jewish people and show that, while yet being a Christian, he yet was a good Jew—went and sponsored these persons. I'm saying now, twenty centuries later, "Paul, why in the world are you still offering animal sacrifices?" And the Lord came back, "It's that spirit of identity in union with your people, wanting to reach out in the common basis of faith in Jesus Christ, that forgets all the things that separate people from people." That's why he was sponsoring the vow. That's why he was still making animal sacrifices, so that he might be all things to all people, so that he might win some (1 Corinthians 9:22).

Yet he got into terrible trouble, for someone there saw him and they remembered that they had seen with him the Greek at Ephesus by the name of Trophimus, the Ephesian. They had seen Trophimus in the city and they thought Paul had brought him into the temple—past the dividing

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wall. They said right on the spot, “Grab him!” And they took Paul and physically carried him out of the enclosure, and were ready to tear him apart, because he violated the sanctity of the law.

That led him to imprisonment. It led him into bondage at Rome. By the time he writes Ephesians, it’s been between three to five years since he had had that experience. He’s been in captivity all these years, because he violated, in the eyes of somebody, a law. He’s had a chance to think about that.

He basically says, as his bottom line, “God has destroyed the human dividing wall that separates people from people and has made one whole new thing in the world.”

Here’s what he says specifically, “There are some things that have excluded us and made us stand on the outside of the wall—our label.” The label then was the label “Gentile” or “uncircumcised.” And if you were that, you were outside of God’s wall and you could never come into salvation. We have our own labels for people. We may call a person “unspiritual.” We may look at a person and say, “They’ll never get saved.” We may have tagged them that they don’t have any possibilities of coming to God. We preset the arrangement. But God doesn’t look at our labels of exclusion.

Outside that wall, there was alienation. Paul said, “You were separate from the Messiah.” The Jews may have had many things that needed correction. But they had one thing for them: They believed in the Messiah. They believed God’s anointed one would come. They believed history was going somewhere. And the Gentiles didn’t have that. For them, where was history going? It was cyclical. It was meaningless. It was nothingness—excluded from the Messiah, excluded from Israeli citizenship—a condition, which still prevails today among the Gentile world. Foreigners to the covenant. What did it matter that God spoke to Abraham? If they hadn’t physically descended from Abraham, they had no lot in Abraham. What did it matter that God

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promised David a throne? If you're not part of David's people, then you're not part of the promise of the throne. Excluded from the covenants of promise. Alienated. Not feeling like we fit.

In the midst of all that exclusion, we felt as Gentiles—hopelessness and godlessness. And the two go together. When you're without hope you're without God. And when you're without God, you're without hope.

Bertrand Russell best expresses, on the part of modern man, what it is to be hopeless and godless, “Man's origins, growth, hopes and fears, are but the outcome of accidental collision of atoms, accidental chance meetings of atoms that produced all this. No heroism. No attempts can preserve an individual life beyond the grave. All the labors of the ages. All the inspiration. All the noonday brightness and human genius are destined for extinction and the vast depth of the solar system. And the whole temple of man's achievement must inevitably be buried beneath the debris of a universe in ruin.” That is what it's like to be without hope.

Now we've been brought out of that exclusion—near to God. Near to other people, through the teaching of Christ. Yes, Jesus does give us the story of the Good Samaritan. We've been brought nearer by neighborly example, to the example of Christ himself. After all, He did eat with sinners and harlots. Doesn't He teach us to break down these barriers among people? But Paul's not concerned about the teaching of Christ. He's not concerned here about the example of Christ. He says, “We have been brought near by the death of Christ.”

The alienation between ourselves and God was so great that nothing else would fix it, except the death of Jesus Christ. I would be telling you a bald-faced lie if I told you I understood everything about the doctrine of atonement. I don't understand the doctrine of atonement. I understand just a wee bit, and I'm sure it's just a fragment of what the atonement involves from God's point of

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view. But I know this about the atonement: that God, making us at one with Him through the cross, treats our sins so seriously that nothing else would save us except the death of Jesus Christ. God treats the estrangement that we have with one another so seriously that the only thing that will call us into fellowship with one another is something as radical as the death of His Son on the cross. He died to make us one with Him. He died that we might be one with one another. He died that we might be one within ourselves.

We, who were excluded, can now be included. That's Paul's great theme in verses 14–18. We're included because of Christ.

I. He is our peace. He himself is our peace, which made the two one and has destroyed the barrier.

Why are there so much anger and severed relationships and hurt and alienation? They are there to the degree that Christ does not become our peace. When deeply surrendered to Christ, hostility must leave. He abolished, in His body, the Old Testament ordinances and commandments. No longer can you base your relationship with God on the basis of performance or how good you are. But upon whether or not you are in Christ. He is our peace.

II. He not only is our peace, He makes peace.

When we come to the cross, our hostility is put to death. He makes in the cross one new person. One new mankind, out of this Jew-Greek. Never in the history of the world, until the church came along, had society been united and it could be said that "in Christ there is neither male nor female" (see Galatians 3:26-28). I want to say, "bah, humbug!" to those in the body of Christ today who want to make a distinction, as though one were better than the other. In Christ, there is neither male nor female, neither Jew nor Greek, neither slave nor free. We are one in Him. He makes peace. One new thing in Him.

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The word Paul uses here for “new” does not refer to a “new” example of something which already exists. But a new thing of which there is no other copy. It is totally new. It’s the one new thing God is doing in bringing to His church people from all kinds of backgrounds and creating in human affairs one new thing.

I know many things the church is not. I can articulate to you a list as long as my sleeve of the failures of the church. But I know this it is: In society, it is unique. It is a brotherhood and a sisterhood. It is the shining instrument of God’s work in unifying people who have no cause to be together at all—except in God.

He unified, He made peace through His cross. If you’re looking for assets, they’re in the cross. Many people look at the cross and never see anything there. But if you’ll get into the cross, you’ll see the peace of God and the love of God and the grace of God. It’s in the cross. He is our peace and he made peace and He proclaimed peace.

Verse 17 says, “He proclaimed peace to you who were far off.” Miles separated you from God. People who were near, good people who had gone to church all their life, He brought that *shalom*, which is more than the cessation of hostility. It is well-being and security. In Christ, there is no east or west, no male or female, no black nor white, no Republican or Democrat. It demeans the gospel when we put a political message on it and say, “If you are a Republican, you are a Christian,” or, “If you are a Democrat, you are a Christian.” He has made peace and we all have access, by the one Spirit, to Him. Christ includes. He included me. I didn’t belong in the temple He was building. You didn’t belong. But by His grace, He included us.

Paul goes on to describe then the edifice God is building in the world. He says we are “no longer foreigners and aliens, but fellow citizens with God’s people and members of God’s household, built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the chief

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cornerstone. In him the whole building is joined together and rises to become a holy temple in the Lord” (Ephesians 2:19-21).

You need to have a little bit of sanctified imagination here to get what Paul is drawing at. What Saint Paul is saying is, beginning with Christ, God is building a temple in the world. Not a physical temple, but a spiritual temple. The cornerstone is Jesus. He fitly joins the walls together and provides for the proper alignment so the walls will rise as they should. Then the foundation of the apostles and the prophets. We gather what Peter says, “We become living stones placed in the building.” Here’s how I visualize this: This temple is going on now. We don’t see it. You don’t see it physically. People aren’t getting up on one another’s shoulders, modeling the temple of God.

But the very real building process has been underway for twenty centuries. Like the first temple, it is being built without the sound of hammer or ax or tool being heard. The temple is really being constituted in the heaven. We’re in the quarry world, where the rocks are being hewn out to fit with one another.

It’s not just us in that temple. Not just our family. Not just our church. Not just our denomination. Not just our age. There, a church of Jesus Christ from everywhere is, from all times. God is building His temple in the world. And we’re a part of it, if we’ve come into Christ. We’re part of something greater than ourselves. What a contrast the first verse of Ephesians 2 is with the last verse. In the first verse, “You were dead in transgressions and sin,” and the last verse, “You are built together to become a dwelling in which God lives by His Spirit.”

Membership in the body of Christ. You were once far off, but you now belong. Don’t act like a foreigner anymore. Treat your brother or sister Christians as truly a brother or sister. Take your place in the wall of the temple, and let the whole building rise to the glory of God.

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Closing Prayer

Taking this communion again today, our Father, reminds us that we are indeed part of a larger family, which began in Your cross. Lord, there may be persons here today who feel excluded from You. And maybe they don't only feel it, but they really are because they've never come to You. I pray that this will be a time of spiritual birth and awakening. That anyone here who does not know You, will not leave this service without You in their life. That You, the Lord of glory, will come into their hearts. There are others, Lord, who maybe wrestle with this whole matter that we've been talking about. How far do You go in the church? Do you let barriers down? How should you receive people who believe differently from You? We know, Lord, that we have the witness of the Spirit that will lead us to all truth (John 16:13). Help us, Lord, to hear Your words, "Judge not that ye be not judged" (Matthew 7:1). And, Lord, we pray for Your church. We thank You for the other churches of all different kinds of names that bear Your name and lift up Your cross. We do pray, Lord Jesus, that there will be a great visitation of Your Spirit upon each church in this area. Lord, we want to pray in this regard for the pastors in this area. That You might be preeminent in everyone and, among the Christians in our area, there would be such a visible unity of love and caring that the world couldn't help but note—not competition, but love. Lord, we're not competing with any other church. Lord, if You send a revival, the churches in this area couldn't contain all the people that would be won. Lord, we are in cooperation for the building of Your kingdom. Help us to see our fellow brothers and sisters in that way. And Lord, keep us from the error of thinking that since we belong to the universal church, we need not take our part in the local church. Help us to be a part of the part. Because it's only by being a part of the part that we can really be a part of the whole as well. Help us, Lord, to take our station and be faithful, supporting the people who are on our shoulders, and praying for the people whose

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shoulders we are on. And reaching out with love and care to the people who are across from us.

That all of us, together, might express Your love. Especially in families. We pray for the gentle

peace of Christ to break down the dividing wall of hostility and that the dreams that we dream

for the church are the same that we dream for the family. May You be pleased to be present with

us now as we take the bread and the cup, in the name of the Lord. Amen.