



ONE CHURCH

EPHESIANS

Ephesians 2:11-22
Lesson 4—One Man

January 9, 2022

Introduction

How do you make a church?

That seems like a simple question, but don't be fooled. History's path is littered with the remnants of churches.

Many followed a man who, once he was gone, the followers scattered. Others came about to fight some great injustice and lost heart over time.

They are not just names in dusty church history textbooks, lost to time.

In our last lesson, we discussed what God was doing—he was creating a masterpiece in the church.

He told them in the verse we left off with:

“For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them.” (Ephesians 2:10, ESV)

He was crafting something the world had never experienced.

This lesson answers a question. “How does God make his masterpiece?” Let’s find out what Paul says about that in Ephesians 2:11-22.

Discussion

Before and After

Before secular scholars blushed at the way time was divided, BC (before Christ) and AD (in the year of our Lord). Even though modern scholars have strained Christ from the timeline, they could not eliminate the reality.

Paul describes what life before Christ was like and what it became after.

The Chosen People

When you read through the Old Testament, a single fact is apparent. God had chosen Israel as his people.

It started with Abraham. Standing as an alien in Canaan, God made him solid gold promises. They would be the foundation of God’s choosing a nation to be his nation.

It started with a symbol of dedication, one unheard and not practiced by the nations. God’s people would have a physical mark of dedication in circumcision.

“You shall be circumcised in the flesh of your foreskins, and it shall be a sign of the covenant between me and you.” (Genesis 17:11, ESV)

After the passage of over 400 years, a tattered group of slaves left Egypt under the leadership of one of their own, Moses. God took them to the desert of Sinai, where he made them his own people. Listen to what he told them:

“For you are a people holy to the LORD your God, and the LORD has chosen you to be a people for his treasured possession, out of all the peoples who are on the face of the earth.” (Deuteronomy 14:2, ESV)

No one would have the spiritual status of Israel. In it, the promise of a great blessing would flow. They believed that the coming Messiah belonged to them and none other.

That emphasis was carried on in the New Testament until it grew old and cracked with time.

When Jesus made a journey outside of the friendly Israeli territory, he found himself confronted by a poor and hungry Canaanite woman. She begged for help.

Jesus seemed callous, but both he and the woman recognized the social convention of the times.

And he answered, “It is not right to take the children’s bread and throw it to the dogs.” She said, “Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters’ table.”” (Matthew 15:26-27, ESV)

To the Jews, the Gentiles were filthy strays looking to infect their godly purity with their actions. You ignored them, drove them out, and made sure they understood their place.

It became problematic in the infancy of the church. So strong was this teaching of special privilege that Jewish Christians had a demand: be circumcised as we are, or you cannot be a child of God.

“But some men came down from Judea and were teaching the brothers, “Unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved.” (Acts 15:1, ESV)

It is this picture Paul shows in the opening of this lesson. Using four phrases, he paints the bleak spiritual destiny of Gentiles.

“Therefore remember that at one time you Gentiles in the flesh, called “the uncircumcision” by what is called the circumcision, which is made in the flesh by hands—remember that you were at that time separated from Christ, alienated from the commonwealth of Israel and strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world.” (Ephesians 2:11-12, ESV)

Listen to the punctuation marks:

They were the “uncircumcised, the filthy outsider.

They were separated from Christ or the anointed one, the Messiah. For Jews, the Messiah was sent explicitly for their race and none other.

They were in a state of estrangement from God’s way and had no access to the “secrets” of the almighty.

They were strangers to the covenant. It was not meant for them and was unavailable to them.

This left them “without hope and godless” in the world. They were born into depravity and had no chance of changing that state, no matter what happened.

God’s promises were for his people, not for them.

But Now

Verse 13 opens with a lightning bolt.

"But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ." (Ephesians 2:13, ESV)

But now...something dramatic has happened. In Christ, those distant to promises, excluded from hope, were "drawn near," a term the Rabbis used to describe those near to God.

Christ had done something dramatic. He was creating his masterpiece in the church.

But how? Did God merely say, "now both of you are in the church, "go get along?"

Is this a merger of two different groups?

Many times we speak of it that way. For convenience, we all talk of "Jewish Christians" and "Gentile Christians." Yet, this passage demolishes that reality.

Years ago, I had a friend who was a preacher part of a merger of two churches. Men would try to mediate middle ground to meld and merge two backgrounds together.

It would seem to be easy. Both groups believed in the church, believed in Christ, practiced immersion for the forgiveness of sins, and conducted the Lord's supper each Sunday. Both had what we call "the distinguishing marks of God's church."

Yet, he said it was the hardest thing he had ever done. They argued about everything. How many men serve at the Lord's table? Which songbooks to use? Who are going to be the elders? Who is going to be the preacher? What time will they start worship and Bible classes? What will be their curriculum in Bible classes?

The truth is humans bring their egos and their own expectations to such an arrangement.

God would not have any of that.

Instead, he was doing something dramatic. He was not creating unity, but a unit, different from any of them had been before.

Twice in this lesson, he gives this insight:

“For he himself is our peace, who has made us both one and has broken down in his flesh the dividing wall of hostility” (Ephesians 2:14, ESV)

He has made us one. The church was not two groups with commonality. It was one unit founded on a different premise.

Then, in verse 15, he makes it more pointed.

“by abolishing the law of commandments expressed in ordinances, that he might create in himself one new man in place of the two, so making peace,” (Ephesians 2:15, ESV)

He creates in himself “one new man.”

The term new is vital to understanding what God was doing.

Greek contains two words that shade “new” differently.

One of them is like a new model. It is like buying a new car. Cars have been around for over a century. What we buy is just a newer form of an old concept. However, Paul uses the second kind of “new” in this passage. He describes the church as having a different quality, a different body than has ever been produced before.

As Adam was the first man from God’s creation, the church is the “new man” of God’s creation, never seen before.

But don’t leave this point without understanding it.

Christianity doesn’t make Jews into Gentiles or Gentiles into Jews. He doesn’t clean up a hobo so he can come to church.

He changes both Jew and Gentile into something else—a child of God. No longer is the Gentile the child of perdition, and no longer is the Jew, the child of Abraham.

The third century preacher named John Chryostom commenting on this passage said, *“it is as if one should melt down a statue of silver and a statue of lead, and the two should come out gold.”*

It is a change of the very nature of the people that makes the church possible. It is also what has caused it to endure for centuries.

How God Works

What is striking is not what makes the church the church. We grew up in times when we wanted to differentiate what the church of the New Testament looked like compared to the churches of the day. We pointed out doctrinal differences.

Paul moves farther out than that. He goes straight to the source of what makes those differences different.

It is the work of Christ in the world and his sacrifice for the church and her members.

Twice, you hear Paul thumb the text to make his point. In verse 13, he says

“But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ.” (Ephesians 2:13, ESV)

Then, three verses later, to make sure we do not miss it, he says:

“and might reconcile us both to God in one body through the cross, thereby killing the hostility.” (Ephesians 2:16, ESV)

The death of Christ on the cross is the generation of this new thing called God’s church. It is not a social organization, and it is not just for our fellowship and our cama-

raderie. Those things happen because of what Christ has done for us through the cross.

I fear we miss the point of the cross. Things are spoken of often tend to become so familiar they get overlooked. Like a stain that says on the carpet, concepts touched on lightly lose their punch.

Jesus died on a Roman cross for the sins of the world. That is the reality and the history. But it has more meaning than a death of an innocent man on false charges.

Paul talks of reconciliation, a way of balancing the books. Man has sinned, creating a debt that must be paid for. Yet, as the person who buys a house they cannot pay for, we purchased a life we cannot pay for.

Jesus pays our price.

So far, we understand that. Jesus pays the price we would not pay to satisfy God's holiness.

It is the concept of the scapegoat.

Every society has a concept of a scapegoat, someone who takes the blame.

The Jews knew it well. During their feast of Atonement, the high priest would sacrifice and then dribble blood on the head of a goat. The animal was then turned into the desert to die a lonely death.

Was Jesus a scapegoat?

Remember, the goat on the Day of Atonement did not choose his fate. It was imposed on him.

And martyrs throughout time died for faith and principles but never thought about it until the moment.

One of Paul's central truths is this:

Jesus did not come and die on a cross. He came in order to die on a cross.

His sacrifice was not the victim dying for a cause. It was a choice made far before the event to change the outcome.

That is why Paul can say what he says in this passage.

"For he himself is our peace, who has made us both one and has broken down in his flesh the dividing wall of hostility by abolishing the law of commandments expressed in ordinances, that he might create in himself one new man in place of the two, so making peace," (Ephesians 2:14-15, ESV)

Jesus "makes peace." It is a phrase describing when two people are at odds. But then, a mutual friend brings them back together and takes away their hostility.

The only way for there to be peace, for such different people to be the church, is not to bring their individual differences to the party. It is to let Christ remake them both into what God intends.

This "peace" comes practically. A terrible barrier existed.

"For he himself is our peace, who has made us both one and has broken down in his flesh the dividing wall of hostility" (Ephesians 2:14, ESV)

Paul describes it as a "dividing wall of hostility." The anger and prejudice were so great, it was made into architecture.

Paul is describing something every Jew and Gentile understood.

There was a large courtyard called the Courtyard of the Gentiles in the great temple. They were literally standing on the outside looking in. They were permitted into the space. But then, they would encounter a low fence or screen designed to keep the Gentiles from crossing into the temple proper.

In fact, archæologists on the temple site uncovered a brick with an inscription warning Gentiles that “beyond this point” they could not cross.

Hence the significance of both this passage and that of Christ’s crucifixion in Matthew makes more sense.

What happened when Jesus died on the cross?

“And Jesus cried out again with a loud voice and yielded up his spirit. And behold, the curtain of the temple was torn in two, from top to bottom. And the earth shook, and the rocks were split.” (Matthew 27:50-51, ESV)

Even though Matthew describes the rending of the curtain that separated the Holy Place from the Most Holy Place, it is apparent that all barriers fell at his death. Even graves were opened.

What was the barrier to the church? It was the very commandments and ordinances the Jews held to.

They demanded the circumcision of their converts. They had to keep many laws, not only the 613 laws in Moses’ code but the tens of thousands of traditions and manmade restrictions in the Talmud.

It was too much to do. In fact, the ordinances made great walls to mark off the faithful. Even in Judaism, it differentiated the spiritual and those who were more serious. The latter were the Pharisees. And there were only 6000 of them, which even kept many Jews in a different class.

God emphasized that performance, no matter how good, would not cleanse you. It would not put you in his family. It was the blood of Christ, not the acts of man.

This provided something that barriers were designed for. While the law kept people out, Christ gave “access” to the king of the universe.

“For through him we both have access in one Spirit to the Father.” (Ephesians 2:18, ESV)

The picture is of entry into a thrown room. Usually, only the beckoned entered. To get a real sense, remember the scene from the old movie *The Wizard of Oz*. When Dorothy and her friends arrive at Oz, they are forbidden to see the wizard. They are given access, but it is a terrifying scene.

Yet, the blood of Christ opens the door to God. Now, coated with the blood, it is the mark of entry into God’s presence. Now, anyone who was God’s child could come through the Spirit all received when the blood washed away sin in baptism.

The Result

All of this changed so many things. To try to make it clear, Paul uses two images.

The first is a household.

We know what a household is. We live with family. No matter what, we are related to them. We might fuss and fight, but they are part of us, and we are part of them. This is the emphasis in verse 19:

“So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God,” (Ephesians 2:19, ESV)

The verse drips with a relationship. We are living in God’s house, and no longer are we “aliens” who lived alongside someone but did not enjoy the same protection. Instead, we are of God’s household, kinsman with Christ’s blood putting us together.

The second image is a building.

It is a prevalent image used by both Jesus and Peter.

“built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus himself being the cornerstone, in whom the whole structure, being joined together, grows into a holy temple in the Lord. In him you also are being built together into a dwelling place for God by the Spirit.” (Ephesians 2:20-22, ESV)

The construction of the time had massive stones laid on top of the other. The one that held the weight was the cornerstone. It provided stability and strength.

Jesus is the cornerstone.

The next is the truth as conveyed by apostles and prophets. The church is not sharing opinions but built on the truth that doesn't change.

Finally, Paul speaks of us. We are laid brick on a brick that joins the structure together. Remove a significant set of bricks, and a building falls.

I saw this once. When Vickie and I moved to the Gulf Coast, we arrived after Hurricane Alicia had hit. Next to the church building was a funeral home.

But one wall was completely demolished. It happened because a few bricks were blown out by the winds. Without the adjoining supports, the bricks kind of “zippered” apart and fell to the ground.

That is the fear of a church that views some people as “necessary losses.” They will eventually lose what God wanted them to have.

But Paul says one more thing about the church. He says, “you are also being built together.”

While we point to when the church was established, the building continues today. Paul describes the continuing building of God's church.

In Barcelona, Spain is a massive cathedral called Basílica de la Sagrada Família. It is different for many reasons.

It was designed and started by Gaudi, a well-known Spanish artist. The work started in 1882. Today, it remains unfinished. Any completion date is pushed to the future.

The church of the Lord Jesus remains under construction. With each person saved by the blood of Christ, it grows. And Paul says it will never be finished until the end of time.

Conclusion

The church is a marvel, not to be taken for granted. It refashioned a world at odds where all men can find God's family, no matter their race or background.

At the center of that church is not its ritual or organization. To emphasize those is to make it a simple human organization.

Instead, the church's unity is held by a single weight-bearing beam—Christ and his sacrifice.

Where Christ is, there is the church.

Never disregard it or try to change it. It is a grand masterpiece like of which the world has never seen.