

1 **Vitality and Viability Study Committee Bible Study #5**

2 **Unity in Christ – Ephesians 2:14-18**

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4 There is one main point that Paul’s letter to the Church in Ephesus is trying to communicate:
5 Through Christ, God is gathering up all things, particularly all *people*, into a divine unity.
6 Through Christ the great secret of the ages has been revealed, which is that Jews and Gentiles
7 have full access to the Spirit of God and God has blessed them both in every way.

8 As we read Ephesians from our vantage point in history, which is some 2,000 years after it was
9 originally written, this might not seem like a particularly ground breaking statement. Well, of
10 course, both Jews and Gentiles have access to God! If they didn’t we wouldn’t be sitting here
11 today. It might not seem particularly controversial to say that both Jews and Gentiles have
12 access to God, but in the context of the early church, it’s hard to overstate just how big of a
13 conflict this really was.

14 As with any Biblical text it’s important to try to understand things like who the original audience
15 was, who the writer was and what the world that they lived in was like. Unfortunately, with
16 Ephesians there is significant debate as to the date it was written, whether Paul or one of his
17 disciples wrote it, and even whether it was written to the church in Ephesus or more broadly to
18 the churches in Asia Minor.

19 While it’s hard to pin down some of these details what we can say relatively confidently about
20 this letter is that Ephesians is a letter written solidly within the Pauline tradition, fairly late in
21 the first century CE., to a group of Christians in a non-Jewish region of the world, and to a
22 church, or group of churches, that clearly had a mix of Jewish and Gentile Christians who were
23 trying to figure out how to be the church together. With this context in mind, it seems natural
24 that one of the central issues that is being addressed in Ephesians is the relationship between
25 Jews and Gentiles, and whether or not they are both fully part of the church.

26 In terms of understanding these particular verses in the larger context it also helps to
27 understand where they fit in the structure of Ephesians. Ephesians can first be broken down
28 into two sections: chapters 1-3 and chapters 4-6. 1-3 are making the point that the secret that
29 was revealed in Jesus was to bring Jews and Gentiles together in keeping with God’s eternal
30 purpose (1:9-10, 2:19, 3:11). Chapters 4-6, then, begin to flesh out what that unity looks like in
31 four different areas of life: in the Church (4:4-16), in the pagan world (4:17-5:20), in the
32 household (4:21-6:9), and in the realms of governments and cosmic powers (6:10-20).

33 Interestingly, our scripture verses fall in a place in the letter where they can be read as the crux
34 of the main message of the first half of the letter, and thus of the whole letter itself. Thomas R.
35 Yoder Neufeld, in his *Believers Church Bible Commentary* on Ephesians lays out the first three
36 chapters of Ephesians as a Chiasm. It is called a Chiasm because it looks somewhat like the
37 Greek letter Chi (pronounced /**kai**/), which looks like the English letter **X**. Most noteworthy
38 here is that a Chiasm is a common Biblical writing structure which mirrors itself at the beginning
39 and end, all leading to a central point in the middle.

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1	A Blessing of God	1:3-14
2	B Prayer of Wisdom and Power	1:15-23
3	C Gentiles and Jews (You and We) Raised to Life	2:1-10
4	D Christ is our peace	2:11-22
5	a <i>once strangers and aliens – without God</i>	2:11-12
6	b <i>Christ has brought the far and near</i> 2:13	
7	c CHRIST IS OUR PEACE	2:14-16
8	b ¹ <i>Peace to the far and near</i>	2:17-18
9	a ¹ <i>No longer strangers – at home with God</i>	2:19-22
10	C ¹ Gentiles and Jews Reconciled in Christ	3:1-13
11	B ¹ Prayer for Wisdom and Power Resumed	3:14-19
12	A ¹ Doxology	3:20-21

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14 This is all to say that these few verses are the key to the message of the first half of the letter to
15 the Ephesians. The first half of the letter is the key to understanding the main message of the
16 entire letter of Ephesians, a letter which was being written to one of the major groups of
17 Christians in the early church in the midst of one of their most significant conflicts. Perhaps we
18 should pay attention to these verses.

19 Within these verses there are four major messages that seem worthy of our attention. **First** is
20 that the work that God has done through Jesus was to bring unity and break down hostility
21 between two groups, specifically the Jews and Gentiles. Looking past the text and asking what
22 the author might be addressing here, we can infer that there was, in fact, real hostility between
23 these two groups. Even 50-60 years after Jesus there was a hostility, as skepticism, a rejection,
24 a prejudice, an outright dislike of each other between Jews and Gentiles. Even within the
25 church, they just didn't respect each other and didn't see each other as fully Christian. It's for
26 this reason that later on in chapter 4 the author tells them that they should, "*Put away from*
27 *you all bitterness and wrath and anger and wrangling and slander, together with all malice, and*
28 *be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ has forgiven*
29 *you.*"⁷ Christ breaking down the wall of hostility between these groups was no small matter.

30 We might understand this hostility a bit better when we understand just how radical is the
31 **second** message. Verse 15 begins with, "*He has abolished the law with its commandments and*
32 *ordinances...*" We might miss the emotional impact of this today, but to someone born in the
33 Jewish tradition, this was almost blasphemy. From a Jewish mindset the law was not just a list
34 of rules they had to follow. The law was the contract between people and God. God made a
35 promise to care for the people, to provide for them, to protect them and in return they did
36 what God wanted them to do. The law was how they knew what God wanted, it was the very
37 thing that shaped them into the people of God, it was their access to the Spirit of God, and it
38 was their guarantee of God's favor. Following the law was how humans gained access to God in
39 the first place. And, by the way, circumcision was the sign of that contract between people and

⁷ The Holy Bible: New Revised Standard Version. (1989). (Ephesians. 4:30–32). Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers.

1 God. It was what proved that someone was actually being obedient to God and that they had
2 access to God.

3 From a Jewish perspective, this is the way it had been for thousands of years. This is the way it
4 worked, period. There was no getting around the law. The law was the path to God, and now
5 you're telling me that all of a sudden all of these Gentiles get to have access to God too, and
6 that they don't have to follow any of the rules that we've all had to? You're telling me that
7 Jesus has just thrown out all of the rules that have been in place since Moses and they get to
8 cut in line and don't even have to be circumcised?! Well...yes, actually. That's exactly what
9 Paul is saying. To be clear, the second half of Ephesians makes it clear that being made new in
10 Christ means living in a very different way than the world around them. However, those things
11 named later in Ephesians are a far cry from all of the laws laid out in the Hebrew Scriptures.
12 Doing away with the law was both the removal of a giant barrier for the Gentiles, and it was
13 also a worldview-upending change for the Jews.

14 For people who have had the rules spelled out very clearly for generations, to suddenly say that
15 they no longer apply is a rather disconcerting thing. However, the **third** thing that our scripture
16 reminds us of is that in place of the Law the early church was given the Holy Spirit. It is striking
17 that in Ephesians this new unity that is made possible through Christ not only breaks down the
18 wall of hostility and does away with the Law, but through Christ *"both of us have access in one
19 Spirit to the Father."*

20 I am reminded of the story of Peter and Cornelius in Acts 10 and 11 where the evidence of God
21 at work in them was not adherence to the Law, but the evidence of the Holy Spirit. I am also
22 reminded of Galatians 5 where we are told that the evidence, or fruit, of the Spirit is *"love, joy,
23 peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control."* The reason
24 that the author of Ephesians can say that Jesus abolished the Law and that Jesus brought Jews
25 and Gentiles into unity and equality is because they all now have access to the Holy Spirit which
26 will guide them into the future. It is the Spirit, not the Law, which is the guide. And, it is
27 evidence of the Spirit, not adherence to the Law, which is the test of being a follower of Christ.

28 Which brings me to the **fourth**, but most important point to make here: The unity between the
29 Jews and Gentiles in Ephesians comes through their mutual following of Christ. It is first the
30 work of Christ on the cross that brings reconciliation between these two groups and puts to
31 death the hostility between them. To be clear, however, in Ephesians unity does not mean
32 uniformity. It was the Law that demanded uniformity. It is the power of the cross that brings
33 them together and makes them co-heirs in spite of their differences so that, as 3:10 says,
34 *"through the church the wisdom of God in its rich variety [emphasis added] might now be made
35 known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly places."*

36 Unity in Ephesians means that the old rigid rules are abolished, and there is now room for a
37 new array of people and practices which may challenge our old understandings of
38 righteousness. This does not, however, mean that any behavior is suddenly acceptable. Unity
39 means that we all allow the Spirit of God to be our guide. Unity means that we no longer see
40 opposing groups as people to be silenced, but as fellow family members (dare I say "Brethren")
41 who all have access to that same, one Spirit of God. Unity comes not from uniformity, but
42 rather from our shared renewal in Jesus Christ and our pursuit of following his way of the cross.

1 **Thought for Today**

2 In John 17 Jesus prays for the unity of, not only those who believe in him in his day, but those
3 who will *come to believe in the future*, which means he’s praying for us. In this prayer he says,
4 “I ask not only on behalf of these, but also on behalf of those who will believe in me through
5 their word, that they may all be one. As you, Father, are in me and I am in you, may they also
6 be in us, *so that the world may believe that you have sent me.*⁸[emphasis added]” I don’t know
7 what the future of our denomination is, but I know that in order for the watching world to
8 believe that the message we preach is in fact true, we must find a way to come together in
9 unity. Our credibility to preach the Gospel depends on it.

10 As daunting and difficult of a task as this might seem at times, I thank God that in Ephesians we
11 learn that the work of Jesus on the cross was to reconcile two groups who seemed
12 irreconcilable. Through the power of Jesus Christ the Jews and Gentiles were brought together.
13 They did eventually come to see each other with respect, dignity, and love. Through the power
14 of Christ they were able to see the Spirit at work in each other. Because of the power of God’s
15 reconciling work through Jesus we now have the privilege to be following the same Lord Jesus
16 some 2,000 years later. It is this power that gives me hope for whatever lies ahead.

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18 **Questions for Reflection**

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- Who do you identify with most in the early church - The Jews or the Gentiles?
 - Is there someone in the church who you would view with hostility in some way? Is there someone who would view you with hostility? What do you need to do to follow Christ’s example and begin to break down the walls of hostility between you?
 - Where do you see evidence of the Spirit at work in the church?
 - What evidence of the Spirit do you see in those with whom you disagree the most?
 - To whom do you need to reach out to in order to repair a broken relationship – in your local church? In your district? In our denomination?
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⁸ The Holy Bible: New Revised Standard Version. (1989). (John 17:20–21). Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers.