

2/18/24**The Unity of the Church*****Ephesians 2:11-22*****Pastor Douglas Scalise, Brewster Baptist Church**

On Thursday, January 20, as part of preparing for our Thrive Cape Cod Conference on March 8 and 9, I attended a lunch in Hyannis with 15-20 pastors from across the Cape. We asked pastors, “*What issues are you concerned about that might be helpful for us to have a breakout session about?*” A subject that raised a lot of concerns might surprise you – it was the political climate in our nation and its impact on the church and individual Christians. Foremost in pastors’ minds was a lack of respect for different opinions and the potential for political issues to cause conflict, division, and a lack of unity in the church – and how to deal with that in a presidential election year.

It’s important to understand that unity in the church is not the same as uniformity. Among Jesus’ 12 apostles there was Simon the Zealot, who was part of a group that wanted to overthrow the Roman occupiers, and Matthew, who cooperated with the Romans in taxing his own people until Jesus called him to follow him. If Jesus could call and disciple two people coming from either end of the political spectrum in his inner circle of twelve, then we would hope that in a healthy church, **if Christ has first place in our hearts and our devotion**, we should be able to live and serve together regardless of an individual’s political leanings. Unfortunately, that’s not always what happens. James Emery White shared in a recent podcast¹ that Christians seem to have an underdeveloped skill of disagreeing agreeably.

I take some comfort in knowing that trying to overcome division and hostility in the church with unity and peace is nothing new. In the churches we read about in the New Testament, there were often people with very different backgrounds and upbringings, whether Jewish, Greek, Roman, or other ethnicities. While there wasn’t **uniformity** among these people, **unity** among believers is important. Jesus’ longest prayer in *John 17* is about his followers being one. The Apostle Paul in many of his letters emphasizes the importance of understanding that whether one is Jewish, as he was, or not, all who put their trust in the Lord are one in Christ.

We see this in Ephesians chapter 2, starting with verse 11, which begins a new section about the church’s oneness despite the barriers of race and culture, which had

¹ Church & Culture Podcast | Church & Culture (churchandculture.org) See, On Disagreeing with Fellow Christians.

kept Jews and non-Jewish nations apart. The Jewish people were often regarded with animosity as an odd people with strange customs, Sabbath observances, food laws, a belief in a single God who just so happened to single them out as special, and who revealed to them a law and way of living that was unique. On the other hand, reverence for Torah and how it was interpreted, and a sense of being called by God and specially blessed with covenants of promise, turned into what was seen by some non-Jews as a form of exclusivity, national pride and arrogance that looked down at all other nations – so there was truly a dividing wall of hostility between Jews and Gentiles.

It was into this dynamic of conflict that Paul shared a message of peace and unity in Christ with the church. Today we're continuing our series based on the letter to the Ephesians – *Celebrating the Grace and Power of God in a United Church*. If you were to ask random people what they think of when they hear the word, “church,” you'd get a variety of answers. Some people might describe the physical building where we gather for worship, fellowship, discipleship, and to support one another. Other people would describe a worship service with singing, scripture, prayer, and a message. Some people would use negative words such as abuse or hypocrisy. For other individuals, church makes them think of dear and close friends who add so much value, love, and encouragement to their lives. All those answers are understandable and have some validity.

In *Ephesians 2*, **Paul describes the church as A New Multi-Ethnic Family that is One in Christ.** Paul says that **God's will in Christ is to create a new unified humanity that can live together in peace and be a dwelling place for God.**

Listen to *Ephesians 2:11-22*:

“So then, remember that at one time you Gentiles by birth, called ‘the uncircumcision’ by those who are called ‘the circumcision’—a physical circumcision made in the flesh by human hands— **remember that you were at that time **without Christ**, being **aliens** from the commonwealth of Israel, and **strangers to the covenants** of promise, **having no hope and without God in the world. But now in Christ Jesus** you who once were far off **have been brought near** by the **blood of Christ.**”**

For he is our **peace; in his flesh** he has **made both groups into one** and has **broken down the dividing wall**, that is, the **hostility** between us. He has **abolished the law** with its commandments and ordinances, **that he might create in himself one new humanity in place of the two**, thus making **peace**, and might **reconcile** both groups to God **in one body** through **the cross**, thus putting to death that **hostility** through it. So he came and proclaimed **peace** to you who were far off and **peace** to those who were near; for through him both of us **have access in one Spirit** to the Father.

So then you are no longer **strangers and aliens**, but you are **citizens with the saints and also members of the household of God**, built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as **the cornerstone**. **In him** the whole structure is joined together and **grows** into **a holy temple in the Lord**; in whom you also are **built together** spiritually **into a dwelling place for God.**”

In *Ephesians 2*, Paul writes about **the unity of the church** – a unity that only God could and can bring about. First (*Ephesians 2:11-13*), we hear about **the situation for the Gentiles Before and After Christ’s coming**. Second, Paul makes the stunning statement (*Ephesians 2:14-18*) that **Jews and Gentiles Are Now One Body in Christ**. As a result, there is **One Church on One Foundation** (*Ephesians 2:19-22*).

The situation for the Gentiles Before and After Christ’s coming. The first people who heard this letter were primarily Gentile believers in Asia Minor, what is modern day Turkey. They’re being reminded of what their lives were like before they knew Christ and were part of the church. Paul says they didn’t have any hope in a Messiah, they didn’t have the rights of citizenship within the chosen people, they lacked a true knowledge of God, and lived in a sad state of hopelessness. But now they have been brought near to God through Jesus’ sacrifice and shed blood on the cross. Gentiles now share with Israel in the covenant of fellowship with God.

Some of us can relate to the Gentile believers Paul was writing to. Some of us can remember a time we lacked knowledge of and a relationship with God; we felt hopeless, sad, and uncertain before we knew Christ and came to faith. Sometimes we may feel those emotions even when we’re believers, but we feel them as part of God’s family, as members of the church, not as people who feel like we’re outsiders who have no

connection to God. We have been brought near to God, not by anything that we have done, but by the blood of Christ.

Paul writes in verse 14, *“For he is our **peace**; in his flesh he has made both groups into one and has broken down the dividing wall, that is, the hostility between us.”* In the temple in Jerusalem, there was a wall that separated the court of the Gentiles from the rest of the temple, and Gentiles couldn’t go any further in, they couldn’t get any closer. Beyond a wall in the temple, there was also the Torah, or the Law of Moses, and how it was interpreted, that also separated Jews and Gentiles. Paul says in stunningly strong language that the law of Moses has been abolished or canceled, and the church is **a new humanity** that transcends national groups. *“He has abolished the law with its commandments and ordinances, that he might create in himself one new humanity in place of the two, thus making peace”* (*Ephesians 2:15*). In Christ, God has cleared away the barriers that have separated different peoples, different nations. God is about putting to death hostility and proclaiming peace to those near and far, Jews and non-Jews. **This double reconciliation to God and our fellow human beings is a key contribution of Ephesians.** In Christ, both groups *“have access in one Spirit to the Father.”*

Do any of you have a lock on a door into your home? How about a lock on your car if you have one? Some people have keypads that require an access code to get into their house. Why do we have locks, keys, and access codes? Because we don’t want just anyone walking into our house or getting into, and driving away with, our car. We tend to put ways to control and limit access to places and things that we consider valuable. The amazing thing about the good news of the gospel is that God has removed every barrier to access to God in and through Christ! A central theme in Ephesians is how **access to God is now freely available to all in Christ, regardless of their ethnic, racial, or religious background.**

Finally, in describing how Jews and Gentiles are one in Christ and that there is **One Church on the One Foundation**, Paul writes in *Ephesians 2:21-22*, *“In him the whole structure is joined together and grows into a holy temple in the Lord; in whom you also are built together spiritually into a dwelling place for God.”* Ponder that last phrase as you think about the church. **Paul says, it’s in Christ that the whole church in its diversity is joined and held together.** In Paul’s

time, he was referring to Jews and Gentiles, enslaved and free, men and women. In our day, whatever differences we may have with other members of the church, Christ holds and binds us together.

Jill and I spent some time this past Friday and Saturday with our son Greg, his wife, Marci, and their baby Victor. We enjoyed our visit and were able to help them in a variety of ways. One of the nice things at the seminary is there is a ministry called “meal train” where students can help someone else with a meal. Greg and Marci have been blessed with meals for two weeks as they’ve been settling in as new parents. Dinner last night came from classmates, one of whom is Egyptian. I asked Greg and Marci, how many different nations do they know people from who are at the seminary, and they started naming off nations – China, Japan, Korea, Malaysia, Indonesia, Myanmar, India, Egypt, Lebanon, Ghana, Zimbabwe, and there were more. I said, “What a beautiful reflection of what Paul was describing in *Ephesians 2* – all these men and women from so many nations with so many different cultures and customs, yet all bound together by a common commitment to and love for Jesus and the church and preparing to serve God all around the world.” This is a fulfillment, and an embodiment of what Paul was describing in *Ephesians 2* in many ways, including that the temple of the Lord is no longer one physical building in one particular place.

The church is to grow into “a holy temple in the Lord.” The temple is no longer in Jerusalem; every church in every nation is to grow into a holy temple in the Lord. The church is to be a place where holiness of life is fostered, developed, and growing in all of us. This may force us to reconsider long held beliefs, assumptions, stereotypes, or prejudices; it may require self-examination and repentance. It may mean having a posture of moral humility, and a desire to seek to hear and understand another person’s point of view. Following the example of Jesus, each of us can be striving to be people who break down walls of hostility, rather than building them, who seek to be instruments of peace and unity. Growing in spiritual maturity and Christlikeness should be part of all our daily “To Do List.”

Finally, Paul says all believers are interconnected and interdependent, we “are built together spiritually into a dwelling place for God.” Our faith is personal, but not private; it’s unique to each person, but not individualistic. God’s design for the church is for us to be built together spiritually into a

dwelling place where God's Spirit and presence are manifested and obvious to all, and where the power of God is unleashed and touches and transforms lives. In a time of division and hostility in our nation and in the world, I pray our church can be an example of a different way of being together in community. That we can be a community of peace and unity, of joy and love, of generosity and service.

When you hear the word church, I hope one of your first thoughts will be, "*that's the community I'm a part of that's built together spiritually into a dwelling place for God.*"

Questions for Discussion or Reflection

1. How would you describe the difference between unity and uniformity? Why is the difference between those two important to understand in a family, a church, even a nation?
2. What does Jesus say about unity among his followers in *John 17:1-26*? How does that relate to *Ephesians 2:11-22* and what Paul says about the unity of the church as a new multi-ethnic family that is one in Christ?
3. Why is unity important in a church? What happens in and to a church that lacks unity? What is a unified church capable of doing?
4. Based on what you know of Ephesians and Paul's letters, what were some of the dividing lines or differences among people in the church in the first century that needed to be overcome?
5. What are some differences or points of division among people in our church or the church in America today?
6. What do we learn from Jesus and *Ephesians 2:11-22* that can help us to break down dividing walls, be instruments of peace, and to be "built together spiritually into a dwelling place for God"?