

“A New People”
Ephesians 2:11-3:13
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Today’s message isn’t about you or me individually – it is about us, us as a people, a church.

As some of you have heard me say many times before, Christianity is very personal but it is not private.

The Apostle Paul began his letter to the Christians in and around Ephesus by giving us God’s perspective on life – a Christian worldview.

In the first 14 verses he writes of God’s gracious work for us from before creation, right through Christ’s work on earth, and on into eternity when we will be with him.

The words he used were chosen, predestined, adopted, redeemed, forgiven, given the Holy Spirit, and a promised future.

Then in the balance of chapter 1 he prayed – he prayed that those truths about our relationship with God would **grip our hearts and minds** becoming the very truths that shape our lives.

In the first section of chapter 2, as we saw last week, he writes with powerful words how this new relationship we have with God is by grace alone, through faith alone, in Jesus alone.

Now in the latter half of chapter 2 and first half of chapter 3, Paul moves from the individual nature of Christianity to the corporate nature of it – from Christianity as just “Jesus and me” to Christianity as our relationship with each other.

This is a difficult shift for many of us.

As I have shared with you before, Christianity in America has been privatized.

One evidence of that is that often when you bring up your Christianity, the one to whom you are talking will say something very post-modern like: “I’m happy that you have found

something that works for you, but I'm still looking for a spirituality that fits me."

But it's not only post-moderns who react that way.

Millions, who call themselves Christians are unwilling to talk about their relationship with Jesus saying, "Oh, that's too private – my religion is between me and my God."

The private nature of their Christianity is not only in their unwillingness to talk about their faith, but it is in their "designer" approach to church.

They hop from church to church, program to program, trying to find just the right combination of programs, convenience and fit to match their tastes and lives.

This is strong, but I'll say it anyway: If your Christianity is only private, it probably isn't Christianity.

Today, I want you to see the way the Bible describes a significant dimension of Christianity - namely, Christianity as Christ's church.

I'm sure you understand, I'm not talking about the church as a building or a program or even as an institution – though most churches appropriately have all three.

I'm talking about the church as a **people**.

And the church that the Bible describes is not just a collection of individuals but it is a group of people with a common identity – an identity so strong that that it supercedes all other identities.

God has created a new people – a people whose bond and allegiance to Christ **and each other** is greater than race, gender, nationality, or even biological family.

Today I want you to see how this happened and I want you to see the significance of it for us.

But to get there I first want you to see how the Apostle Paul describes his own role in this new thing that God has done and continues doing.

Ephesians 3:2-6 “Surely you have heard about the administration of God's grace that was given to me for you, ³ that is, the mystery made known to me by revelation, as I have already written briefly. ⁴ In reading this, then, you will be able to understand my insight into the mystery of Christ, ⁵ which was not made known to men in other generations as it has now been revealed by the Spirit to God's holy apostles and prophets. ⁶ This mystery is that through the gospel the Gentiles are heirs together with Israel, members together of one body, and sharers together in the promise in Christ Jesus.”

In verses 2-5 Paul says that, as they already knew and he had already written about briefly, God made known to Paul and others a mystery that in previous generations was not understood.

And what is that mystery?

He answers it in verse 6, “This mystery is that through the gospel (that is the good news about Jesus death and resurrection for us) the Gentiles are heirs together with Israel, members together of one body, and sharers together in the promise in Christ Jesus.

Here is that new people that I was talking about earlier – “heirs together...sharers together”.

And it is noted most pointedly in the phrase “members of one body”.

Most of you know that roughly 4000 years ago God chose one man, Abraham, and his descendants to be specially related to God for a specific purpose – to be the people through whom God would bless the whole world.

And truly the Jews were granted special grace:

- They were given the Word of God,
- they were given the system of sacrifices by which their sins could be forgiven,
- and they were given the promise of a Messiah and future.

It is true that non-Jews could enter into that grace but only by becoming proselytes to Judaism.

Unfortunately most Jews did not see themselves as God's means of serving others so instead of seeing themselves as recipients of grace they thought of themselves as deserving privilege.

And a huge wall of separation grew up between Jews and Gentiles.

But it had always been God's plan to use the Jews to prepare for the Messiah.

- 1 Peter 1:20 "(Jesus) was chosen before the creation of the world, but was revealed in these last times for your sake."
- Ephesians 1:9-10 "And (God) made known to us the mystery of his will according to his good pleasure, which he purposed in Christ, ¹⁰ to be put into effect when the times will have reached their fulfillment..."
- Galatians 4:4 "And when the fullness of the time was come, God sent forth his Son..."

For what purpose? To create a **new** people in Christ.

Again verse 6 "This mystery is that through the gospel the Gentiles are heirs together with Israel, members together of one body, and sharers together in the promise in Christ Jesus.

In verses 2-6 Paul says **that** is the revelation and insight he was given.

And in verses 7-12 he says he was commissioned by God to declare that new message.

Ephesians 3:7-12 "I became a servant of this gospel by the gift of God's grace given me through the working of his power. ⁸ Although I am less than the least of all God's people, this grace was given me: to preach to the Gentiles the unsearchable riches of Christ, ⁹ and to make plain to everyone the administration of this mystery (the plan), which for ages past was kept hidden in God, who created all things. ¹⁰ His intent was that **now**, through the church, the manifold wisdom of God should be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly realms, ¹¹ according to his eternal purpose which he accomplished in Christ Jesus our Lord. ¹² In him and through faith in him we may approach God with freedom and confidence."

From other texts of Scripture we know that Paul was in fact specially chosen to carry the good news to us, to the Gentiles.

- Acts 9:15 The Lord said to Ananias: “This man (Paul) is my chosen instrument to carry my name before the Gentiles and their kings...”
- Paul himself reports in Galatians 2:7 “...They (The Lord’s disciples) saw that I had been entrusted with the task of preaching the gospel to the Gentiles, just as Peter had been to the Jews.”

And again in this text Paul refers to his message as being a new message (an “administration”), a plan to reveal a mystery that had been kept hidden for generations).

And again what was the mystery? Christ’s church – that new people.

And notice he says this had always been God’s plan, which he accomplished in Christ Jesus.

Now having seen Paul’s role in this new thing that God is doing, let’s go back to chapter 2 and see Paul’s fuller description of what this new thing is.

Ephesians 2:11-22

“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)--¹² 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.

Circumcision was the physical sign that distinguished Jews from Gentiles.

In verses 11&12 Paul describes the spiritual condition of those who were not Jews:

- Separate from Christ (Messiah).
- Excluded from citizenship in God’s people.
- Foreigners to the covenants of promise
- Without hope
- Without God

Unless they were proselytes to Judaism, all non-Jews were in the same spiritual condition:

- No Messiah to break into their condition and bring freedom.
- Not able to participate in the privileges of God's people.
- Not included in the promises of God.
- Without hope of any kind and in spite of their many false gods they were without the one true God.

According to these verses the Judaism of the Older Testament was NOT just one out of many ways to God – it was the only way.

And those outside of it were helpless and hopeless.

And unless something changed, that would be the condition of every non-Jew throughout history.

According to the Bible our situation was pathetic.

And with no hope, how does a person respond?

- The Greek Sophocles reportedly said, "The best thing to happen to a man is never to be born; the next best thing is to be born and die immediately." (In Leon Morris, 62)
- Bertrand Russell wrote, "Only on the firm foundation of unyielding despair can the soul's habitation henceforth be safely built." (In Morris, 63)

William Hendricksen described the condition of non-Jews this way: "Christ-less, stateless, friendless, hopeless, and Godless." (In Stott, 96)

As I just said, unless something changed, that would be the condition of every non-Jew throughout history.

But change it did!

And that is what Paul will now describe.

Ephesians 2:13-18

"But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far away have been brought near through the blood of Christ. ¹⁴ For he himself is our peace, who has made the two one and has destroyed the barrier, the dividing wall of hostility, ¹⁵ 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, ¹⁶ and in this one body to reconcile both of them to God through the cross, by which he put to death their hostility. ¹⁷ He came and preached peace to you

who were far away and peace to those who were near. ¹⁸ For through him we both have access to the Father by one Spirit.”

Verse 13 begins with of those strong adversives in the Bible: “But now” in Christ you who once were far away are brought near.

And how did that come about?

That separation from God has changed if you are “in Christ.”

If you are trusting him, you are “in him” and being “in him” you are brought into intimate relationship with God.

And how is that possible?

It is “through his blood” which is a clear reference to the historical event of the crucifixion.

By his death for us Christ became our peace – making peace between us and God and us and each other, even Jew and Gentile.

And how did he bring peace between Jew and Gentile?

He destroyed the barrier - “the dividing wall of hostility.”

Paul is most likely referring to the physical barrier erected on the Temple grounds to keep Gentiles from desecrating the Jewish Temple.

An inscription found in 1871 reads: “Let no foreigner enter within the screen and enclosure surrounding the sanctuary. Anyone who is caught doing so will have himself to blame for his ensuing death.”

And Paul is using that barrier as a symbol of the separation and hostility between Jews and Gentiles.

And how did Jesus destroy the barrier between Jews and Gentiles?

He did it by “abolishing in his flesh (again a reference to his crucifixion) (abolishing) the law with its commandments and regulations.”

Since **Jesus** had said, Matthew 5:17 “Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them” how can Paul say Jesus abolished the law?

Apparently Paul is saying that when Jesus died on the cross he abolished the ceremonial law with its special days and sacrificial system.

He abolished its necessity by completely fulfilling the ceremonial law with the sacrifice of his own life.

And it is also true that Jesus abolished the erroneous Jewish idea that keeping the moral law would make one right with God.

In summary, through his death, Jesus removed the barriers between Jews and Gentiles in relationship to God.

And now the to the major point Paul is making:

Jesus, through his death and resurrection has created a single new humanity – a new people.

- In verse 14 “He made the two one.”
- In verse 15 stated most pointedly: “His purpose was to create **in himself** one new man out of the two...”

Jesus created and is yet creating “one new man.

This is not same as in 2 Corinthians 5:17 where Paul writes, “Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation...”

Here in Ephesians he is not referring to one person but to a new race, a new people.

Notice he says “he made the two one” and later, “one out of two”.

Clearly he is saying that all Jews who are “in Christ” and all Gentiles who are “in Christ” are part of this newly created people.

Elsewhere he says it this way:

- Colossians 3:11 “Here there is no Greek or Jew, circumcised or uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave or free, but Christ is all, and is in all.
- Galatians 3:28 “There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.”

Kent Hughes summarized it this way: “Jesus didn’t Christianize the Jews or Judaize the Gentiles. He didn’t create a half-breed. He made

an entirely new man. For we are God's workmanship, created in Christ Jesus." (Hughes, 93)

Again remember Paul here is not talking about a new individual but a new race, a new family – with emphasis on the group as a whole.

Then in verses 19-22 Paul describes this new people this way:

Ephesians 2:19-22 "Consequently, you are no longer foreigners and aliens, but fellow citizens with God's people and members of God's household, ²⁰ built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the chief cornerstone. ²¹ In him the whole building is joined together and rises to become a holy temple in the Lord. ²² And in him you too are being built together to become a dwelling in which God lives by his Spirit.

In Christ, you have become:

- "Citizens" of God's kingdom,
- "Members of God's household" family.
- And the very dwelling place of God' himself (God's temple).

Paul says, you are no longer foreigners but fellow citizens with God's people.

You are no longer foreigners living in a different land, not even foreigners with a "green card" but you now have a birth certificate.

I think it was actress Sally Fields who played the lead role in the film, "Not Without My Daughter.

She was in a foreign country attempting to get her daughter out. When she finally finds her daughter they run from the authorities hiding in cars as they cross a desert and then on foot through the early morning streets of a city attempting to find the American Embassy.

Then with the tension at its highest, you at first catch just a glimpse of the American flag – then as they round a corner, it comes into full view.

And only the hardest-hearted viewers don't cry as that flag waves full over the embassy as the symbol of our country and refuge.

In Christ, we are citizens of God's kingdom – we belong, it's ours.

- We have a common heritage: Abraham, Moses, David, et al.
- We have a common allegiance: To the same God and Father of us all.
- We have a common goal: To glorify God
- We have a common destination: "But our citizenship is in heaven..." Philippians 3:20

Not only are we citizens of God's kingdom but we are also members of God's Family.

We have been adopted into that family with all the privileges.

My son has two birth certificates.

One his former life, the other his new life – the old certificate is null and void.

He is fully and irreversibly part of the family.

If you are "in Christ" you are fully and irreversibly **part** of the FAMILY of God – notice the emphasis on your relationship to the whole.

We are citizens of God's kingdom, members of his family and together we are God's temple.

Using the metaphor of a building Paul describes how the foundation of the temple is built on the truths taught by the apostles and prophets but the cornerstone of the building, the most critical part of the building, the part without which the building couldn't stand, is Jesus.

And then back to the point he is making:

In Jesus the whole building joins and fits together and rises to be a temple in which God dwells... we too are being built together.

Paul is not describing **one** Christian; he is describing all Christians together – our new relationship to each other, a relationship so strong that it has even broken down the barrier between Jew and Gentile.

But notice please that the power to break down barriers between people is not just by joining a group.

The only thing that can break down those barriers is the fact that we are all "in Christ".

It is by our connection to him that we are connected to each other and **being** connected to him we **are** connected to each other.

Notice how many times in this short passage Paul emphasizes Christ's role in bringing us into one new people:

- 2:12 separate from Christ
- 2:13 but now in Christ...brought near through the blood of Christ.
- 2:14 He himself is our peace
- 2:14 He has made the two one
- 2:15 To create in himself one new man out of the two
- 2:16 In this one body to reconcile both of them to God
- 2:17 He came and preached peace
- 2:18 Through him we both have access to the Father
- 2:20 Christ Jesus himself as the chief cornerstone
- 2:21 In him the whole building is joined together
- 2:22 In him you too are being built together to become a dwelling in which God lives by his Spirit.

Here's the point: If the forgiveness of sins is through Jesus, if we are brought into a right relationship with the God through Jesus, and if we have the assurance of life with God after death through Jesus, then it is equally true that we are part of his body – thus part of each other as part of his church – we belong to each other.

What are the implications?

The Gospel is not about saving one soul but about creating a new people!

The gospel results in the church not just in saved individuals.
John Wesley, "The Bible knows nothing of solitary religion."

Yes, individually we belong to God,

- we belong to God's purposes in the world,
- and we belong to God's promised future for us,
- but it is **equally true and important** that we belong to each other.

God didn't just create a new person, he created and is yet creating a new people.

And it is not simply that all Christians are created equal but that we are joined together. (Snodgrass, 151)

We are only what God created us to be when we are in relationship with his people as we are in relationship with him.

Are you in relationship with Christ's people?

I'm not asking do you attend church, do you give money, nor even do you teach a class or sing in an ensemble.

I'm asking, have you become part of the lives of God's people?

Kent Hughes wrote, "I am not saying you have to go to church to be a Christian, but you also do not have to go home to be married." (Hughes, 110)

What defines you most?

- Is it your family?
- Your job?
- Your education?
- Your hobbies?
- Your money?

Or is it that you are part of God's new community?

What's your strongest allegiance?

Is it to your family, your income, your independence, or to the church – God's people?

When color of skin, or economics, or social class, or music preferences, or anything other than the essential truths of the gospel separate us, then we have violated this great truth of the gospel – we are God's new community.

Everyone has a "church" – a place where you go that defines you, a people with whom you identify, and a purpose to which you give allegiance.

It might be a bar, a stadium, a place of work or for Christians it is the church – the place where Christ is the norm and where allegiance is paid to him. (Snodgrass, 156)

Even evangelism looks different when we think of our true relationship with Christ as expressed in our relationship with each other.

We are not salesmen out hawking a product.

We are part of community inviting others to belong, really belong.

Evangelism happens when those without faith in Christ see what faith in Christ looks like in the real world of relationships.

We don't have just facts to recite we have a family to experience.

We want unbelievers to come not just to hear a sermon or a lesson but to experience being with us.

Because we are great? No, but because we have a great, forgiving, redeeming, adopting, life-giving God.

AND because in Christ we know what it means to belong to each other.

In this text, the Apostle Paul doesn't ask his readers to do a thing except learn and be gripped with the significance of what it means to be the new people of God.

How will it change your perspective on church – the church as the new people of God?

How will it change your relationships with those in the church?

How will it change what you expect from the church?