

## RADICAL INCLUSION

1<sup>ST</sup> Peter 2:4-6

Ephesians 2:11-22

August 19, 2018

Remember that *you* were at that time **separated** from Christ, **alienated** from the commonwealth of Israel, **strangers** to the covenants of promise, **having no hope** and **without God in the world**.

Separated, alienated, strangers, having no hope, without God in the world. Do you hear the unrelenting drumbeat of despair?

Paul spoke of the Gentiles vs the Jews, and so I will too, but when I speak of the Gentiles, please hear your name: The Gentiles: that's you and me, folks. And the Gentiles were aliens from the society of Israel. And your point is ... ?

Well, the people of Israel were the holy people. We've seen and heard that holy really means *different, separated from, other than*. In what sense were the people of Israel different from other peoples?

They were different in the sense that in the realest way, their only king was God. Other nations might be governed by democracy or aristocracy, but Israel was theocracy. Their sovereign was God. When the Psalmist sang, "I will extol thee my God and King," he meant it perfectly literally.

The Gentiles might be ruled over by kings and tyrants and rulers and unpredictable senates and councils; the king of Israel was God. To be an Israelite was to be a member of the society of God; it was to have a citizenship which was divine. Clearly life was going to be completely different for any nation which had a consciousness of destiny like that.

It is told that when Pericles, the greatest of the Athenians, was walking forward to address the Athenian assembly, he used to say to himself: "Pericles,

remember that you are an Athenian and that you talk to Athenians.” But for the Jew it was possible to say, “Remember that you are a citizen of God, and that you speak to the people of God.” There is no consciousness of greatness in all the world like that. And the Gentiles were excluded from it.

Second, the Gentiles were strangers from the covenants on which the promises were based. The Jewish idea of a covenant was this. They believed that God had approached their nation with a special offer. “I will take you to me for a people, and I will be to you your God” (Exodus 6:7). This relationship involved not only privilege, but also obligation. This covenant relationship involved the keeping of the law. The relationship depended on the people keeping and observing and obeying the law which God gave to them. But it gave to the Jews the peculiar and the unique consciousness of being the people of God. Simply to be a Jew was to have the consciousness of dignity. Paul could not forget, because it was a fact of history, that the Jews were uniquely the people of God, the instrument in God’s hand.

Third, it says that the Gentiles were without hope and without God in the world. The Gentile could say, “We blossom and flourish as leaves on the tree, and wither and perish.” But they could not triumphantly add, “But naught changeth Thee.” It was really true that the Gentile was without hope because they were without God. Israel always had the shining, radiant hope in God, which burned clearly and inextinguishably even in her darkest and most terrible days; but in his or her heart the Gentile knew despair, because he and she was without hope and without God in the world.

But now in Christ Jesus you who once  
were far off have been brought near  
in the blood of Jesus Christ.

Those who were afar off have been brought near. Isaiah heard God say, “Peace, peace to him that is afar off, and to him that is near” (Isaiah 57:19). When the Rabbis spoke about accepting a convert into Judaism, they said that the

proselyte to the faith had been *brought near*. For instance, the Jewish Rabbinic writers tell how a Gentile woman came to Rabbi Eliezar. She confessed that she was a sinner, and asked to be admitted to the Jewish faith. “Rabbi,” she said, “bring me near.” But the Rabbi refused. The door was shut in her face. But now, in Jesus Christ, the door is open. Those who had been far off from God—you and I—have been brought near, and the door is shut to no one. The blood of Christ has broken down the dividing wall of hostility.

A poem by Robert Frost entitled, “Mending Wall” concerns a wall that stands between the poet’s property and his neighbor’s. The poet and the neighbor have to be repeatedly mending it, picking up and putting back the stones that have fallen from the wall. The wall refuses to stay up. The neighbor wonders why. In his opinion, “good fences make good neighbors.” But the poet says there is something in nature, something in reality itself, that will always knock down walls and fences that people put up. He says, “Something there is that doesn’t love a wall, that wants it down.”

St. Paul would emend Frost’s line to read “**Someone** there is who doesn’t love a wall, who wants it down.” That someone, clearly, is Jesus Christ.

There was a literal wall between Jews and Gentiles in the Temple of Jerusalem. It was the wall that divided off the inner court of the Temple, where only Jews could go, from the outer court, into which Gentile visitors could come. The inner court was where the real place of worship was. This meant, of course, that only Jews, only members of the sacred community could go in to worship God. A wall stood between the two kinds of people: Gentiles, who were without God, and Jews who belonged to God.

“But now,” the Scripture says, “In Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ.” That is, Jesus died on the cross, bearing the sins of all people, removing the sin and guilt that kept us all far away from God. “He has abolished the law with its commandments and ordinances, that he might create in himself one new humanity, thus making peace, and might

reconcile both groups to God in one body through the cross, this is putting to death that hostility through it. So he came and proclaimed peace to you Gentiles who were far off, and peace to those (the Jews) who were near; for through him both of us have access in one spirit to the Father.” (vv. 15-17). Christ has made us right with God, by his work on the cross. Now, anyone who believes in Christ, whether Jew or Gentile, is already right with God, close to God, and one of God’s people.

There is no need to look to the Law to make us valuable and worthy and important in God’s eyes. “He has abolished the law with its commandments and ordinances.” The only basis for God’s accepting us and looking upon us as worthy is the basis God has provided. That basis is the life and death and resurrection of the Son, Jesus.

Thus the Law and the special covenant with the Jews is done away with, as a wall between people. There is no true grounds for anyone to feel superior to anyone else, since the only proper basis for anyone’s sense of self-worth is the fact that Jesus loved you and me, and gave himself for us. This is all that any of us can claim, and we cannot ask more of anyone else than is required of ourselves.

The implications of this go infinitely beyond the particular wall that Ephesians speaks of. All other walls of hostility must be done away with, too, and for the same reason. Ephesians 1:10 speaks of God’s plan for the fullness of time, to gather up all things in Christ. It is God’s purpose to unite in Christ all human beings, and indeed all creation, across all barriers, to overcome everything that divides us and keeps us enemies. No more walls!

It is impossible for a Christian of any race or nationality, for example, to look down on a person of any other race or nationality. Nor can my personal animosities or feelings of superiority toward my neighbor stand between us any longer. We are all in the same boat. We all have no reason to boast, no grounds for pride, except the grace of God in Jesus Christ; and anyone can claim that

grace. Christ died for all people. "He is our peace; in his flesh he has made all groups into one and has broken down the dividing wall of hostility between us.

Amen.

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