

African Bible Commentary

Ephesians 2:11–22

Believers' Position: United in One Body

An African man from a rural village met an evangelist in the city and became a Christian. Going to church for the first time, he was amazed to see someone there from a tribe that his own people despised. He angrily demanded, 'What is this "dog" doing in the church? Don't you realize that this "pig" has polluted the church? If you knew where he comes from, you would never have admitted him!' His attitude to a fellow believer was similar to that of Jews towards Gentiles, and vice versa. That is why Paul finds it necessary to speak of the position of both Jews and Gentiles in the church and to remind them that although they had once been separated by religion, culture and race, Jesus Christ has now united them in a new community.

Most of the believers in Ephesus were Gentiles and not Jews. Paul reminds them that the Jews had dismissed them as the *uncircumcised* and had proudly called themselves *the circumcision* (2:11a). Circumcision was the rite that God had instructed Abraham to perform on every male descendent to secure that child's place in the nation God had chosen. The Jewish pride in being God's chosen nation led them to be contemptuous of others, so that the adjective *uncircumcised* was an insult and not merely a reference to a physical state.

Paul knew the dangers posed by such pride and intolerance, so he reminds the Jews that circumcision is a human operation performed by other humans in contrast with the work that God himself does in believers (2:11b). At the same time, he reminds the Gentile believers that before they became believers, they were a) *separate from Christ*, that is, they knew nothing about the promise of the Messiah; b) *excluded from citizenship in Israel*, that is, they had no part in the nation of Israel or in the coming kingdom of God; c) *foreigners to the covenants of the promise*, that is, they had no legal standing in regard to the covenants that God had made with the Jews and his promises to the Jews; and consequently they were d) *without hope and without God* (2:12). Paul emphasizes that the Gentiles had nothing to hope for in God as long as they were separated from Christ.

But whereas they had previously been 'separate' and 'foreigners', who were *far away* from God, now they have been brought *near* (2:13).

They had not gained this new position of privilege by birth or any human ritual, but through the grace of God, expressed in the blood of Christ. His blood had cleansed them of their transgressions and sins and had sealed a new covenant, far superior to the Jewish covenant because it was sealed by God himself, unlike the covenant that was sealed by circumcision done by men.

By bringing together the Jews and the Gentiles, Christ himself has reconciled them to each other, and at the same time has reconciled both of them to God (2:14). He has created a new harmony, just as Isaiah prophesied when he called the coming Messiah 'the Prince of Peace' (Isa 9:6).

The *dividing wall* that separated the Jews from the Gentiles was very real. It was a barrier that kept Gentiles from entering the inner parts of the temple in Jerusalem. This was what Jesus Christ destroyed on the cross. In him there is no barrier or dividing wall between the Jews and Gentiles. In fact, in him all human differences, hostility and barriers are resolved. Jesus Christ has a cure for the evils of racism, tribalism and divided humanity.

Just as Jesus Christ abolished the enmity between Jews and Gentiles, so he abolished the Jewish ceremonial law *with its commandments and regulations* that had also been a barrier between them (2:15a). The Mosaic law made strict demands that could not possibly be kept perfectly and emphasized the differences between Jews and Gentiles, but Jesus fulfilled it by establishing the new covenant by his death on the cross (see Heb 7–10).

In Christ, both Jews and Gentiles are one. He has made them into *one body* in himself (2:15b–16). They have become a new community, the church. What made this possible was the atoning work of Christ on the cross, which destroyed their enmity and brought reconciliation and peace.

Jesus Christ's gospel of peace and reconciliation was preached both to Gentiles *who were far away* and to Jews *who were near* (2:17). Both groups needed to hear the message. The Jews were privileged to have had Jesus preach to them directly, while the Gentiles had received his message through his apostles.

Once again, we have all three persons of the Trinity working together to reconcile Jews and Gentiles to each other and to God: the atoning

work of Christ made reconciliation possible, and the Holy Spirit now gives us access to the Father (2:18).

Paul now returns to his starting point in 2:12, reminding the Gentiles that before they became believers they were *foreigners and aliens* and not full citizens of the kingdom of God. Now in Christ, they have not only full rights of citizenship but also the privilege of being *members of God's household* (2:19). They are now brothers and sisters with the older citizens and family members. They can have confidence in this household because it is built on a solid foundation of a) *the prophets* who foretold the coming of the Messiah, b) *the apostles* who proclaimed the gospel of Christ and founded churches, and c) *Christ*, who fulfilled the prophecies and promises of the prophets through his work of redemption and so became the *chief cornerstone* (2:20).

In ancient buildings, the 'cornerstone' was highly valued because it tied the whole building together. This is precisely what Jesus Christ does for his church, which Paul describes as a new temple (2:21). Jesus Christ is building his church so that it will become *a holy temple*, a dwelling place of God (2:22). In the OT, the temple represented the glory and presence of God; now it is the job of the church to do that. The church becomes God's symbol and testimony of salvation to the world. Individual believers, too, have this responsibility, for they are also referred to as the *temple of God*, because the Holy Spirit lives in them (1 Cor 6:19).¹

Excursus: **WHAT IS THE CHURCH?**

In the African world view, unity is strength. The larger the unit, the better. This applies not only to the individual family (traditionally polygamous, so as to increase the number of people in the unit) but also to the clan and to the tribe. Each group traces its origins to a particular hero and is united around certain beliefs and practices. The same is true of the church.

The English word 'church' comes to us from the German *kirche* and the Scottish *kirk*, but the word

has even older roots in the Aramaic word *kenishtha* and the Greek word *kuriakon*, both of which mean 'belonging to the Lord'. The church is thus 'the tribe of Jesus'—called out of all tribes and nations but without renouncing those groups. However, it may at times call for practices and beliefs that override those of one's earthly tribe.

In the OT the term used for such a group was *qahal* ('a people called together by Yahweh') which was translated into Greek as *ekklesia* ('those called out') and used in the NT to refer to the church. The caller is God, the means of unity is faith in his son Jesus Christ, and the governing constitution is the Bible as read and obeyed under the guidance of the Holy Spirit. The members are referred to as believers in Christ.

The church is both an organism and an organization. It is an organism in that it is united around the saving work of Christ and the indwelling of the Holy Spirit no matter where each member is located. It is an organization in that it gathers around a common purpose and doctrine and acknowledges particular officers as leaders. The organism aspect is more important than the organizational one, but the organization is necessary if the church is to accomplish the Great Commission. The organism aspect was, however, the focus when Jesus said, 'I will build my church, and the gates of Hades shall not overcome it' (Matt 16:18).

Metaphors used to describe the nature of church include

- *The body of Christ*. Jesus is the Head (the ultimate leader) who gives the church (as an organism) its life (Eph 1:22–23 and Col 1:18; 2:19).
- *A temple/building/house of God*. The focus of this metaphor is the unity of the church, for in the construction of a building each of the construction materials has a role to play. This metaphor also emphasizes the ownership of the church. It belongs to God, not to people. Jesus is both its foundation (1 Cor 3:9–17) and the chief cornerstone—the stone that controls the design of the whole building (Eph 2:20, 21). The prophets and apostles are also referred to as foundations in the sense that they were the church's first leaders and the people whom God used as the initial

¹Tokunboh Adeyemo, *Africa Bible Commentary* (Nairobi, Kenya; Grand Rapids, MI: WordAlive Publishers; Zondervan, 2006), 1456-57.

transmitters of its doctrine and practice (see 1 Tim 3:15; 1 Pet 2:4–8).

- *The bride of Christ* (Eph 5:31, 32; Rev 19:7; 21:9). Each individual believer is intimately related to Christ from the moment of justification until the marriage ceremony presented in Rev 19:5–9.
- *A flock* (John 10:16, 27). Through his servants (initially the apostles, but now pastors, priests, or any other title used to designate those dispensing his message), Jesus gathers the members together, gives them direction, and looks after the needs of each member.
- *A vine* (John 15). The focus of this metaphor is the believer's need to be 'connected' with Christ if there is to be any nourishment for growth.

Those who belong to the church have been placed on Earth for a mission. Jesus referred to this mission using the terms 'salt' and 'light' (Matt 5:13–16). Just as salt preserves food from rotting, so believers are called upon to stop the world's moral decay. Just as light helps us see our path, so also believers are called to point all people to the true light (John 1:9) who changes lives—creating love where there is hatred, reconciliation where there is hostility, and hope where there is desperation. This is what the church in Africa, and worldwide, is called to do.

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