

Mark D. Roberts, *Ephesians*, ed. Scot McKnight, *The Story of God Bible Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2016), 76–85.

p 75 CHAPTER 5

Ephesians 2:11–22

### LISTEN to the Story

11Therefore, remember that formerly you who are Gentiles by birth and called “uncircumcised” by those who call themselves “the circumcision” (which is done in the body by human hands)—12remember 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. 13But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far away have been brought near by the blood of Christ.

14For he himself is our peace, who has made the two groups one and has destroyed the barrier, the dividing wall of hostility, 15by setting aside in his flesh the law with its commands and regulations. His purpose was to create in himself one new humanity out of the two, thus making peace, 16and in one body to reconcile both of them to God through the cross, by which he put to death their hostility. 17He came and preached peace to you who were far away and peace to those who were near. 18For through him we both have access to the Father by one Spirit.

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

**Listening to the text in the Story:** Genesis 1–3; 12:1–3; Isaiah 9:2–7; 52:7–10; 53:3–5; 57:15–19; Matthew 5:9; John 17; Acts 1–2; 1 Corinthians 3:16–17; 6:19–20; 2 Corinthians 5:16–21; Galatians 3:26–28; Colossians 3:9–17; Revelation 21–22.

Ephesians 2 overflows with the good news of what God has done in Jesus Christ. Unfortunately, many

of us hear only half of this good news. We are rightly astounded by the fact that “by grace [we] have been saved, through p 76 faith” (2:8). But some of us stop there, rarely moving on to the truth that we are also “God’s handiwork, created in Christ Jesus to do good works” that God has prepared for us (2:10). And even if we appreciate 2:10, we might miss the stunning news in the second half of the chapter or fail to connect its good news with what has gone before. We see it as something additional, as evangelical extra credit, rather than as an essential and glorious element of the good news of God’s saving work in Christ. Surely the second half of Ephesians 2 deserves our full attention, especially in a day when its truth is sorely needed both in the church and in the world.

Ephesians 2:11–22 reveals more of the consequences of the cross of Christ. Its message can be quite surprising if you’re familiar with the good news of personal salvation by grace but not as familiar with the corporate dimensions of this salvation. By paying close attention to the second half of Ephesians 2, we’ll discover more details about the story of God, and we’ll be drawn to live more fully for his cosmic purposes.

### EXPLAIN the Story

#### Summary of Ephesians 2:11–22

The basic form of 2:11–22 is similar to 2:1–10. Both passages begin with bad news, the problem of our condition apart from God (2:1–3, 11–12). A summary of this problem is followed by a heartening introduction to the solution: “But God” (2:4, 13). What follows is the good news of how God, in Christ, has solved the problem of our godless condition (2:4–7, 14–18). Then, the consequences of this solution are spelled out in terms of who we are in Christ (2:8–10, 19–22). The formal similarities between 2:1–10 and 2:11–22 underscore the point that both halves of chapter 2 proclaim the good news of how God has saved us by his grace from death and division.

#### The Problem: Gentiles Excluded (2:11–12)

According to 2:11–12, the recipients of Ephesians, who were Gentiles before they encountered God’s grace, suffered a fivefold plight: they were separated from Christ, excluded from Israel, strangers to God’s promises, hopeless, and godless.

This unhappy picture of Gentile life, which adds to the woes spelled out in 2:1–3, prepares us for the contrast that comes in verse 13 and beyond.

*Therefore* (2:11). The word “therefore [*dio*]” makes a strong connection between the first half of Ephesians 2 and the second half. Thus what follows in 2:11–22 reveals an essential dimension of God’s salvation in Christ.

*Formerly you who are Gentiles by birth* (2:11). This is the first appearance of the word “Gentiles” in Ephesians. Its use here and in 3:1 shows that the p 77 recipients of Ephesians are primarily (if not exclusively) Gentile believers. The Greek word translated as “Gentiles,” *ethnē*, can refer to nations or people groups and was used by Jews as a label for non-Jews.<sup>1</sup> Notice that the recipients of the letter *were* (so the CEB, not the NIV) Gentiles “by birth” (literally, “in flesh,” *en sarki*). They did not become Jewish when they received God’s grace through Christ. Rather, Christ made them into something different from ordinary Gentiles and Jews. The early Christian writing known as the Epistle to Diognetus expresses this same point when it calls Christians a “new race,” neither Jewish nor Gentile.

*Called “uncircumcised” by those who call themselves “the circumcision” (which is done in the body by human hands)* (2:11). “In the body” translates the Greek expression *en sarki*, which means “in the flesh.” The label “uncircumcised” is a literal description of Gentile males, since, at that time, Jewish men were known as having been circumcised. This physical characteristic distinguished Jews from Gentiles and identified Jews as God’s chosen people. Jews used “uncircumcised” derogatively. Their perspective on the Gentiles is spelled out in 2:12.

*Remember that at that time you were* (2:12). This phrase introduces a list of five ways in which the letter recipients, as Gentiles, were excluded from the blessings of God’s people. “At that time” suggests that a new time has come, the “now” of 2:13.

*Separate from Christ* (2:12). In this verse, *Christos* might be translated as “a messiah,” given that Paul is speaking from within a Jewish context. Gentiles were “without a messiah [*chōris Christou*]” because they were cut off from those to whom the Messiah had been promised.

*Excluded from citizenship in Israel* (2:12). The Greek word translated here as “citizenship” (*politeia*) appears elsewhere in the New Testament only in Acts 22:28, where it refers to Roman citizenship. (Philippians 3:20 uses a related word, *politeuma*, for our heavenly citizenship.) In 2:12, *politeia* could also mean “commonwealth.”<sup>3</sup> Israel is, in principle, the official community of God’s people, even if it was under Roman rule when Paul was writing. In the first century, citizenship was not about the right to vote; it was a matter of community, privilege, and honor.

*Foreigners to the covenants of the promise* (2:12). The Gentiles are “foreigners.” The Greek is *xenoi*, which also means “strangers or aliens.”<sup>4</sup> In Ephesians 2:12 we find a phrase unique in Scripture, “the covenants of the promise.” The major covenants between God and Israel in the Old Testament related p 78 to a chosen leader are: Abraham (Gen 12:1–3; 15:18; 17:1–14); Jacob (Gen 28:13–15); Moses (Exod 19:3–6); and David (2 Sam 7:11b–16). Paul might also be thinking of the promised new covenant (Jer 31:31–34; 32:38–40; Ezek 36:24–36). Two Old Testament covenants include the Gentiles (Gen 9:8–17; 12:1–3; 28:13–15), but the Gentiles would not have known these covenants and thus would have been “foreigners” to their promises. In Romans 9:4 Paul refers to the blessings of the people of Israel, including “the covenants, the receiving of the law, the temple worship and the promises,” though without linking covenants and promises explicitly.

*Without hope* (2:12). Hope, as we saw in the commentary on 1:18, is not an optimistic yearning but confidence in a future reality.

*Without God in the world* (2:12). The Greek uses the word *atheoi*, plural of *atheos* (“without God”), from which we get “atheist.” It does not mean that Gentiles do not believe in God or gods so much as that their lives are godless because they are separated from the true God.

### **The Solution Summarized: Gentiles Brought Near in Christ (2:13)**

*But now* (2:13). “But now” sets up a contrast between the recipients’ former existence as Gentiles and their new existence “in Christ Jesus.” This language parallels a similar contrast made in

<sup>1</sup> BDAG 276–77.

<sup>3</sup> So the NRSV; ESV. See Lincoln, *Ephesians*, 137.

<sup>4</sup> BDAG 684.

2:4, where God is also the main actor (“But God”). Here, God’s activity is implied, with “the blood of Christ” identified as that which brought the Gentiles near.

*Far ... near* (2:13, 17). The language of “far” and “near” describes the state of Gentiles before and after their experience of “the blood of Christ.” This language is reminiscent of Isaiah 57:19, where “far” and “near” are used with reference to Jews who are “far” (in exile) and “near” (within the territory of Israel). It’s possible that Paul’s use of “far” and “near” in this passage was influenced by Jewish descriptions of proselytes who were once far but became near when they converted to Judaism.<sup>5</sup> Yet in 2:13 Gentiles are now brought near, not through conversion to Judaism but through Christ’s saving activity.

*By the blood of Christ* (2:13). Paul uses the phrase “by the blood of Christ” to designate Christ’s saving activity. This echoes 1:7, where Paul wrote, “In [Christ] we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of sins.” The sacrifice of Christ on the cross, which involved the shedding of his blood, not only redeemed us for relationship with God but also brought us near to God and his people.

Ephesians 2:13 summarizes the main storyline of 2:11–22. Once the Gentiles were far away from God and his blessings. “But now” they have been “brought near” by God through Christ’s death on the cross.

### **p 79 The Solution Explained: The Peace of Christ (2:14–18)**

Though Paul could have skipped immediately from 2:13 to the consequences of this saving action (2:19–22), instead he devotes five densely worded verses to explaining what being brought near involves and how Christ accomplished it.

*For he himself is our peace... making peace... preached peace ... and peace* (2:14, 15, 17). How did Christ bring the Gentiles near? The answer in 2:14–18 is centered in peace. Christ “is our peace” (2:14). He was “making peace” (2:15). He “came and preached peace” to the Gentiles who “were far away” and “peace” to the Jews who were near (2:17). The Greek word for peace, *eirēnē*, usually

means “the absence of war,” though it can also refer to “peaceful conduct.”<sup>6</sup> The New Testament usage of *eirēnē* is strongly influenced by the Hebrew *shalom*, which can refer to the absence of war but also means “peace, friendship, happiness, well-being, prosperity, health, luck, kindness, salvation.”<sup>7</sup> This robust notion of peace is found for example in Isaiah 32:16–18: “The LORD’s justice will dwell in the desert, his righteousness live in the fertile field. The fruit of that righteousness will be peace; its effect will be quietness and confidence forever. My people will live in peaceful dwelling places, in secure homes, in undisturbed places of rest.”<sup>8</sup>

In Ephesians 2:14–18 Christ makes peace in that he eradicates the “hostility” between Jews and Gentiles (2:14, 17). Yet the peace Christ forges is more than the end of enmity. It involves making Jews and Gentiles “one” (2:14), creating “one new humanity out of the two” (2:15), and reconciling “both of them to God” (2:16). So essential is Christ to this peacemaking effort that he is called, simply, “our peace” (2:14), that is, the peace *of both Jews and Gentiles*.

Christ’s making peace in 2:14–18 expresses and exemplifies God’s cosmic purpose as revealed in 1:10: “to bring unity to all things in heaven and on earth under Christ.” Paul could just as well have said in chapter 1 that God’s purpose is “to make peace among all things in heaven and on earth under Christ.” Thus, the peace that exists between Jews and Gentiles is one essential aspect of the uniting of all things in Christ.<sup>9</sup>

According to Ephesians 2:17, Christ “came and preached peace to you who were far away and peace to those who were near.” To what does “preaching peace” refer? In the Gospel of John, Jesus spoke of peace with his disciples and offered peace to them after his resurrection (John 14:27; 20:19). Yet Jesus also said that he came not to bring peace (Matt 10:34), so it’s unlikely that “preaching peace” refers mainly to the teaching of Jesus. Rather, Ephesians **p 80** 2:17 employs the language of Isaiah 52:7–10, where the messenger of God brings “good news” and “proclaim[s] peace.” Here, peace is the salvation that comes when God reigns on earth. This prophecy of Isaiah ends with the promise that “all the ends of the earth will see the

<sup>5</sup> See Lincoln, *Ephesians*, 138–39.

<sup>6</sup> *NIDNTT* 2:776–77.

<sup>7</sup> *NIDOTTE* 4:130.

<sup>8</sup> See also Ps 85:8–10.

<sup>9</sup> See Col 1:20, where the connection between all things, reconciliation, and Christ’s blood is explicit.

salvation of our God.” Thus, in Ephesians Christ “preached peace” through the whole of his messianic, saving mission, including his proclamation of the kingdom of God and his enactment of this message in his death and resurrection.

The language of Ephesians 2:17 was also influenced by Isaiah 57:19, where the Lord himself speaks “Peace, peace, to those far and near.” Yet now the peace proclaimed encapsulates the whole mission of Christ and is delivered not just to Jews far and near but to all people, including the Gentiles.<sup>10</sup>

*Who has made the two groups one* (2:14). As “our peace,” Christ not only brought an end to conflict between Jews and Gentiles. He also “made the two groups one,” a claim reminiscent of the vision of unity in 1:10. The particulars of Christ’s peacemaking, unifying effort are spelled out in 2:14–18, with special attention given to how Christ took away that which separated Jews from Gentiles and fostered hostility between them.

*Has destroyed the barrier, the dividing wall of hostility, by setting aside in his flesh the law with its commands and regulations* (2:14–15). The NIV rendering of this phrase partly solves and partly obscures problems in the original Greek, which could be translated literally as “having destroyed the dividing wall of the fence, the hostility in his flesh, having set aside the law of commands in regulations.” Several questions arise: What is “the dividing wall of the fence”? How was it destroyed? What is “the hostility”? What is the “law of commands in regulations,” and how was it set aside?

Paul in Ephesians often heaps words upon words, and this may be what is happening with the phrase “the dividing wall of the fence.” Many interpreters suggest this was the actual wall that existed in the courts of the Jewish temple in Jerusalem. This fence separated the court of the Gentiles from the court of the Israelites, thus keeping Gentiles away from the holier sections of the temple. A sign on the fence warned that Gentiles who crossed the barrier would be put to death. This interpretation is supported by the fact that, a few verses later, Paul will speak of building the new temple of God’s people (2:21–22).

Though Paul may have pictured the dividing wall in Jerusalem as he wrote, the text and its

cultural context suggest another, metaphorical meaning for this barrier. In 2:14–15, destroying the wall is linked with setting aside “the law of commands in regulations.” The Jewish law included many commands that distinguished Jews from Gentiles (circumcision, Sabbath, kosher, etc.).  
p 81 Thus the law could be seen as a wall dividing Jews from Gentiles. This imagery appears in a document known as the Letter of Aristeas, written by a Jewish author in the mid-second-century BC.

Now our Lawgiver being a wise man  
... fenced us round with impregnable  
ramparts and walls of iron, that we might  
not mingle at all with any of the other  
nations, but remain pure in body and  
soul... Therefore lest we should be  
corrupted by any abomination, or our lives  
be perverted by evil communications, he  
hedged us round on all sides by rules of  
purity, affecting alike what we eat, or drink,  
or touch, or hear, or see.<sup>11</sup>

Paul sees the Jewish law along these lines, especially those elements that divided Jews from Gentiles. For Paul, the law is a wall of separation not unlike the physical wall in the temple. Not only did the barrier of the law keep Jews distinct from Gentiles, but also it fostered hostility between Jews and Gentiles in the Roman world. Jews looked down on unclean Gentiles for their failure to live according to God’s standards, and Gentiles despised Jews for their peculiar practices that kept them separate from common society. Thus the law could function as a “dividing wall” and could even be thought of as “hostility” since it was a source of enmity between Jews and Gentiles.

In Ephesians 2:14–18, Christ made peace between Jews and Gentiles by “setting aside ... the law” (2:15). He did this “in his flesh,” which is a reference to his death on the cross (see 2:13). Furthermore in verse 16, Christ sought “to reconcile both of them to God through the cross, by which he put to death their hostility.” The irony in this phrase is striking. Literally, Christ was put to death on the cross. Yet at the same time, he was putting to death the hostility between Jews and Greeks through the cross.

<sup>10</sup> See Lincoln’s extensive discussion of 2:17 in *Ephesians*, 146–49.

NIV New International Version

<sup>11</sup> Let. Aris. 139, 142 (*APOT*).



Some interpreters limit “the law of commands in regulations” to only the ceremonial portions of the Torah. They bolster this case by pointing to the positive use of the law in Ephesians 6:2. Evidently, Paul does not believe that the law has no relevance to those who are in Christ. Yet in 2:15, the law that Christ sets aside is not limited to the ceremonial law.<sup>12</sup> The whole law is composed of “commands and regulations.” In some way, this whole law has been set aside through the death of Christ. Without wading into the treacherous waters of controversy concerning Paul’s view of the law,<sup>13</sup> we see in Ephesians that the law is not that which redeems us, saves us, or gives us life. The death of Christ has supplanted the law, and therefore all people can belong to God through faith because of his grace in Christ.

**p 82** *His purpose was to create in himself one new humanity out of the two, thus making peace* (2:15). The verb “to create [*ktizō*]” is used in Ephesians, as in the rest of the New Testament, only in reference to God’s creative activity (see 2:10). In 2:15, the new creation is of “one new humanity,” in Greek “one new human being [*kainon anthrōpon*].” This language is reminiscent of 2 Corinthians 5:17: “Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, the new creation [*kainē ktisis*] has come.” Part of this new creation is the unity of Jews and Gentiles, a result of Christ’s “making peace.” When we are saved by God’s grace (Eph 2:8), we become God’s handiwork created for good works (2:10) and become part of the one new humanity in Christ in which the division between Jew and Gentile has been torn down (2:15). New creation and new community are part and parcel of the salvation we have by grace.

*And in one body to reconcile both of them to God through the cross* (2:16). The phrase “one body” in verse 16 points both to the literal body of Christ, the sacrifice that brought reconciliation, and the metaphorical body of Christ, namely, the church (1:22). The unexpected order of reconciliation in this verse is striking. Ordinarily we would think of Christ as reconciling us first to God and then to each other, with the main emphasis on the vertical divine-human reconciliation (see 2 Cor 5:16–21). In Ephesians 2, however, the horizontal reconciliation between humans comes to the fore. Thus, in 2:16 the picture is of Christ forming Jews and Gentiles

into one body and then reconciling this united body to God. There is no contradiction here between Ephesians and 2 Corinthians. The differing emphases point out that both vertical and horizontal reconciliation matter to God. Both are essential to God’s plan for bringing all things together in Christ (see 1:10; also Col 1:20–22).

*For through him we both have access to the Father by one Spirit* (2:18). In 2:17 Christ preached peace to “you” far away Gentiles and the nearby Jews. Verse 18 changes to the first person “we,” emphasized further by “both.” Both Jews and Gentiles “have access to the Father” in the same manner, not through the law, but “through [Christ]” and “by one Spirit.” The word translated as “access” (*prosagōgē*) also appears in 3:12, where we have *prosagōgē* in Christ, that is, access to God the Father in Christ.<sup>14</sup> This noun *prosagōgē* does not appear in the Greek Septuagint, but the related verb, *prosagō*, is used for presenting offerings to God, which opens access to him.<sup>15</sup> Given the sacrificial and temple imagery in 2:11–22, not to mention the addition of “to the Father” in verse 18, it’s clear that all people can have access to God the Father through Christ and “by one Spirit.” The sacrifice of Christ opens up the way to the Father. The Trinitarian scent of this verse cannot be missed.

**p 83** Though the details of 2:14–18 can be perplexing, the main storyline is clear. Christ forged peace between Gentiles and Jews through his death on the cross, by which he took away the barrier of the law that had divided Gentiles and Jews. The peace of Christ is not just the absence of hostility but also the unifying of the two groups, creating one new humanity out of the two and reconciling this unified humanity to God. Now, all people receive peace through Christ as well as access to God the Father through him and by the Spirit.

### **The Consequences: Gentiles Included (2:19–22)**

The last four verses of 2:11–22 spell out the consequences of Christ’s peacemaking work for those who were Gentiles. These consequences are represented with three parallel metaphors: “you are no longer foreigners and strangers, but fellow citizens with God’s people”; you are “members of

<sup>12</sup> Arnold, *Ephesians*, 162–64.

<sup>13</sup> See an overview in F. Thielman, “Law,” *DPL* 529–42.

<sup>14</sup> See also Rom 5:1–2, where “access” is associated with peace, as in Eph 2:17–18.

<sup>15</sup> For example, Lev 1:2–3 in the LXX.

God's household"; and you are stones in God's temple.

*Consequently, you are no longer foreigners and strangers, but fellow citizens with God's people* (2:19). These "foreigners and strangers" are by implication Gentiles "excluded from citizenship [*politeias*] in Israel" (2:12). Now the former Gentiles are "fellow citizens [*sumpolitai*] with God's people." "God's people" renders the Greek *ton hagion*, namely, all who belong to God, both Jews and Gentiles. The former Gentiles now are included as citizens not in the actual nation of Israel but among those who live in God's kingdom.

*Members of his household* (2:19). Paul's addressees are "also members of [God's] household" (2:19). The underlying Greek word for "members," *oikeioi*, has the root *oikos*, or "house"; this is also the root of the word *paroikoi*, which is used earlier in verse 19 and translated as "strangers." To be members of God's household or family is an even more intimate relationship than being a citizen in God's kingdom.

*Built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the chief cornerstone* (2:20). Verse 20 moves from a family metaphor to a building metaphor. This building has a foundation, "the apostles and prophets," and a cornerstone, "Christ Jesus." For those familiar with 1 Corinthians, this use of foundation language can be surprising. In his earlier letter Paul wrote, "For no one can lay any foundation [for the church] other than the one already laid, which is Christ Jesus" (1 Cor 3:11). Now we find a different foundation, the apostles and prophets, with Christ relegated to the cornerstone. For some interpreters, this is a contradiction that either counts against Pauline authorship of Ephesians or points out Paul's inconsistent theology. But this is a rigid manner of judging Paul. Surely Paul is entitled to use his metaphors freely, shaping them to fit the particular context of his writing. Thus as he writes Ephesians, he looks at the church from a different perspective than p 84 is found in his earlier letter to the Corinthians. He still emphasizes the fundamental, initiatory, essential role of Christ in the church. But he also wants to underscore the importance of those human beings who played a founding role in the church. (Apostles and prophets will appear again in Ephesians 3:5 and 4:11.) Indeed, as we'll see in Ephesians 4, the growth of the church comes

from Christ yet also depends on the work of each and every member.

Most English translations of 2:20 use the word "cornerstone" for the Greek *akrogoniaios*. Yet among recent commentators, a substantial number argue for "capstone" or "keystone" instead.<sup>16</sup> This would make Christ a keystone of an arch, the final stone put in place as the crown of the edifice. While this translation is possible, it does not give enough weight to the use of *akrogoniaios* in the Septuagint version of Isaiah 28:16, "See, I lay a stone in Zion, a tested stone, a precious cornerstone [*akrogoniaion*] for a sure foundation." There, the cornerstone is part of the foundation, the first stone to be laid, which determines the location of the structure. Given the foundational role of Christ in the formation of the church and the use of the foundation metaphor in 1 Corinthians 3:11 and Isaiah 28:16, it seems best to translate *akrogoniaios* in 2:20 along with the NIV

and most other English translations as that part of the foundation known as the "cornerstone." Christ is the stone that determines the placement of every other stone.

*In him the whole building is joined together and rises to become a holy temple in the Lord* (2:21). The building in which God's people are stones is not yet complete, as indicated by the present tense of "rises." Rather, it is in process as it grows to become more fully "a holy temple in the Lord." This image of the church being built anticipates Ephesians 4:11–16, where the church is described as a body that is being built up in love. In that passage, the body is said to be "joined ... together [*sunarmologoumenon*]" (4:16). Similarly in 2:21, "the whole building is joined together [*sunarmologoumenē*]." This underscores the importance of the unity of all of the "blocks of stone" in God's temple, including, of course, the unity between Jews and Gentiles.

The people of God are not just parts of any building, however. They are stones in the growing "holy temple in the Lord" (2:21). In an earlier letter to the Corinthians, Paul used similar language, though without the aspect of growth: "Don't you know that you yourselves are God's temple and that God's Spirit dwells in your midst?" (1 Cor 3:16). The temple is the local community of believers in Corinth (in contrast with 1 Cor 6:19, where the individual human body is said to be a temple of the Spirit).

---

<sup>16</sup> See, for example, Barth, *Ephesians*, 1:317–19.

This portrayal of the Christian community as a temple is striking for two reasons. First, it sets Christianity apart from virtually every other religion in p 85 the Roman world, which featured temples, holy buildings where adherents worshiped their gods. The implicit claim of 2:21 is that God is to be encountered not in special places but in a special people. Second, the Gospels reveal that Jesus fashioned himself as a replacement for the temple. For example, forgiveness of sins could be found in him, not in the temple and its sacrifices (Mark 2:1–12). Thus, for Paul to speak of the Christian community as a temple was to associate the church with Jesus and his mission in a stunning way.<sup>17</sup>

*And in him you too are being built together to become a dwelling in which God lives by his Spirit (2:22).* “You too” highlights the inclusion of the former Gentiles in the building of God, while assuming that Jews are also part of this building (2:22). This is true for all stones that are “in [Christ].” The passive “are being built together” suggests that God is doing the building, something that will be expanded upon in Ephesians 4. “A dwelling in which God lives” is another way of describing the temple of God. The Greek word translated here as “dwelling,” *katoikēterion*, is used in the Septuagint for God’s dwelling place in heaven (for example, 1 Kgs 8:39) as well as the temple in Jerusalem (Ps 76:2; LXX 75:3). God is present in the community of Christians “by his Spirit” (also 1 Cor 3:16).

As we come to the close of Ephesians 2, we hear the story of God’s grace in a new way. Not only has God raised us from death to life, not only has God saved us by grace through faith, not only has God created us anew for good works, but God has also united formerly divided people groups, namely Jews and Gentiles, bringing near those who once were far away and joining all in his kingdom, his family, and his temple. Where we Gentiles were once excluded from God, his people, and his blessings, now we are included in Christ. Where we once were without God, now we are not only reconciled to God but are also joined together with the rest of God’s people as a temple, the dwelling of God on earth. The unifying of Jew and Gentile, far from being something extra in God’s plan, is a powerful symbol of the uniting of all things in Christ and a central element in God’s saving work.

---

<sup>17</sup> See N. T. Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 1996); and his “Jesus’ Self-Understanding,” in *The Incarnation*, ed. S. T.

Davis, D. Kendall, and G. O’Collins (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 47–61.

Michael Allen, *Ephesians*, ed. R. R. Reno, *Brazos Theological Commentary on the Bible* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2020), 47–56.

**2:11–12** Therefore remember that at one time you Gentiles in the flesh, called “the uncircumcision” by what is called the circumcision, which is made in the flesh by hands—remember that you were at that time separated from Christ, alienated from the commonwealth of Israel and strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world.

In 2:11 we enter a new realm, wherein the language of sin and grace and being made alive and faith will have been left behind and a new set of terms will enter the foreground: Jew and Gentile, circumcision and uncircumcision, flesh and peace, body and temple. If the preceding ten verses (2:1–10) fixate on God’s power made manifest in personal salvation, then these twelve verses (2:11–22) turn our attention to corporate reconciliation wrought by that same power of the [p 48](#) almighty God. In moving to a new realm, however, we are not leaving behind the notion of the new creation—that is, that the triune God has “created us in Christ Jesus” (2:10). In this section, we will see more of how the grace of new creation relates to the pangs of our sinful nature, socially speaking.

Though we enter a new realm, the section begins with the word “therefore” (*dio*), and we must ask what prompts this logical call to remembrance. Is the antecedent statement that of 2:10 alone? Perhaps the language of new creation is meant to be explicated by these verses; indeed, the conclusion of this section seems to pick up the building imagery, as 2:10 had spoken of Christians as God’s “workmanship” (2:20–22). Or is the antecedent the entirety of 2:8–10? It may be that we ought to read the remainder of chapter 2 as unpacking consequences of salvation by grace. Or is the whole of 2:1–10 the backdrop for this “therefore” in 2:11? The structure of 2:11–22 maps onto that of 2:1–10, each starting with a reminder of the death from which we have come (2:11–12 paralleling 2:1–3) and the new life (following the

adversative “but” [*de*] in 2:13 and 2:4). It may well be that this broader answer best satisfies, as 2:1–10 and 2:11–22 do serve as parallel explications of God’s powerful grace in response to sin (first personally, second socially). Nonetheless, we are not prevented from also seeing the terminology of God’s workmanship picked up in the climactic section of 2:11–22 and developed via building terminology; in fact, the broader parallel makes exposition at just that point, rather than immediately in 2:11–12, especially appropriate.

What shall we then remember? In fact, “remember ... remember” is the repeated exhortation: Gentile believers in the cities of Asia Minor are to remember from whence they have come. They are to remember seven realities that made them who they were. Almost like a reverse creation sequence, these seven statements identify them in their previous existence.<sup>4</sup> Only after dwelling on their malformation in these varied ways can we hear the good news: “But now” (2:13).

They are, first, to remember that they were “Gentiles in the flesh.” Socially speaking, the most significant divide of the early Christian world was that of Jew and Gentile. Now, “Gentile” was not a self-appellation, but these hearers have learned to apply to themselves a term that Jews used to describe all non-Jews. In many ways this first description is emblematic of all those that follow, for they all tease out its significance in various ways. And this first remembrance regards [p 49](#) a beginning that they, in and of themselves, were incapable of acknowledging. Thus, it is a reminder that the sinner or sinful community does not merely lack the power to effect a needed change, but also suffers from an inability to perceive the needed change. The Bible teaches us graciously how to acknowledge and name our problems, whether in the lament psalms or here in the witness of a group of people who have learned to name their past as Gentiles beyond the range of God’s generous rule.

They are, second, to remember being called “the uncircumcision.” The Jews, those known as “the circumcision,” referred to or “called” them Gentiles. We see that Jews spoke of them and named them. And at least one significant naming

<sup>4</sup> The book of Numbers also includes a sevenfold de-creation account in picking out seven of the ten grumblings of Israel and elaborating on them in chiasmic form (11:1–3; 11:4–34; 11:35–12:16; 13:1–

14:45; 16:1–17:11; 20:2–13; 21:4–9), on which see David L. Stubbs, *Numbers*, *Brazos Theological Commentary on the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2009), 113–14.



was a naming of privation: these ones lacked circumcision. Christians have frequently spoken of sin as privation, a concept developed with special vividness in the writings of Augustine. In his writings, reality is good inasmuch as it is created and sustained and thereby participating in God, and yet sin leads reality to wilt in its loss or deprivation of some element of that good, a suffering we can term a privation. Here we see that these persons were formerly good creations of God, though lacking the sign of circumcision.

What was the significance of this sign that they lacked? Circumcision was commanded of Abraham and Isaac in Gen. 17: “Every male among you shall be circumcised. You shall be circumcised in the flesh of your foreskins, and it shall be a sign of the covenant between me and you” (17:10–11). What covenant? Genesis 17:1–8 has described a covenant order between “God Almighty” and ninety-nine-year-old Abram (17:1). God promises descendants (17:2, 6) and land (17:8) and that Abram will be a blessing to diverse nations (17:4–5). In these three ways 17:1–8 expands on what was originally promised in Gen. 12:1–3. But here it is expanded by highlighting the center of the covenant: “to be God to you ... and I will be their God” (17:7–8).

So Paul’s Gentile hearers were uncircumcised and lacked that covenant promise. Yet Eph. 2:11 does not merely call them “the uncircumcision” and juxtapose them with the circumcised. It qualifies that description of this sign, saying they are “called ‘the uncircumcision’ by what is called the circumcision, which is made in the flesh by hands.” Stephen Fowl says, “This indicates that coming to understand one’s past outside of Christ as a Gentile past is a contested matter. At the very least it will involve learning to see Gentileness in a very particular way, which many Jews might not accept” (2012: 86).<sup>5</sup> As Fowl notes, Paul does p 50 not seem to be undermining the claim that they were uncircumcised, and yet he does relativize that claim. He highlights here the way in which Jews viewed them as excluded, but that social exclusion was not the most definitive facet of their Gentile past (even if some Jews might be bewildered by that claim). Hence he calls them to remembrance again, looking past this surface-level sign to deeper realities in the next verse.

They are, third, to remember “that you were at that time separated from Christ.” After a pause of sorts, Paul launches into a further call to remembrance (signified by the term *hōti*). An in-depth analysis of their Gentile life must begin with their relationship to Christ, and that relationship has to be defined by “separation” or being “apart from” Christ. This segregation must be understood in juxtaposition to the many instances of inclusivity found earlier in the epistle, where repeatedly Christians are said to be in Christ in some way (e.g., 1:1, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 9, 10).

They are, fourth, to remember being “alienated from the commonwealth of Israel.” We need to interpret this alienation as not reducible to the social exclusion mentioned in the preceding verse. In other words, this alienation is more fundamental than mere social exclusion by and from those who call themselves “the circumcision.” It is surely significant that “the commonwealth of Israel” (*tēs politeias tou Israel*) is the object of this alienation, for it highlights the kingdom of God and the reign of his own justice that were not the sphere of Gentile civility. The term *politeias* appears only here and in Acts 22:28 in the New Testament; it seems to connote citizenship. The more notable term here is the name Israel, for the sort of citizenship that these former Gentiles lacked is that of the people who have striven with God (*tou Israel*). Other cities or polities struggle with majority and minority, native-born and immigrant, landowners and journeymen, but this entity struggles with God. In the past, these Gentiles had lived a secular political life; they had been alienated from a politics that strove with God.

They are, fifth, to remember being “strangers to the covenants of promise.” How one interprets the language of covenants here should relate to some extent to the way in which one will interpret 2:15—that is, what it means to “abolish the law of commandments expressed in ordinances.” Some take a stark approach, suggesting that the author here completely relativizes or even repudiates the law of Moses. In such a reading, Gentiles have been brought in because the Mosaic code as such has been decimated (replaced or fulfilled by the law of Christ). Yet 2:12 points in just the other direction. The problem named here is not the covenant of law or commandments but the fact that Gentiles were

---

<sup>5</sup> For a sense of the variety of ways with which circumcision was taken by Jews, see Thiessen (2011).

alien to the “covenants of promise.” They had no divine word guaranteeing them divine fealty or provision.

p 51 They are, sixth, to remember “having no hope.” Inasmuch as they lacked a divine promise, they had no hope. But we must inquire about what that hope regarded. Is Paul addressing a civic hope, a spiritual hope, a moral hope, a material hope? Reading contextually suggests that this hope would be defined by theological language: reading backward, a hope defined by promise, Israel, and Christ; reading forward, a hope of being with God in the world.

Seventh and finally, they were “without God in the world.” If the original creation account of Gen. 1 concluded with the seventh day wherein God rested or made his dwelling place to be with his people in that Edenic paradise, then here we learn that these hearers were not merely politically marginal but spiritually isolated from God. And Paul here manifests what he has prayed for—namely, the power to see further into the spiritual reality than might otherwise be the case. Underneath real fraying of a social fabric, Paul can perceive a genuine godlessness. Eventually, of course, he will wrap up the epistle by reminding his hearers that their battle is not against earthly powers, not against mere flesh and blood (6:12).

**2:13–17** But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ. For he himself is our peace, who has made us both one and has broken down in his flesh the dividing wall of hostility by abolishing the law of commandments expressed in ordinances, that he might create in himself one new man in place of the two, so making peace, and might reconcile us both to God in one body through the cross, thereby killing the hostility. And he came and preached peace to you who were far off and peace to those who were near.

“But now” (*nyni de*) Paul speaks a word of divine power. Just as 1:20 spoke of divine power raising Jesus from death and 2:4 testified to God giving new birth to those children of wrath, so here triune power brings the estranged into the presence of God. For all the role these verses have played in civil rights sermons, we do well to remember that their mood is not hortatory (which will come by implication here and by explicit exhortation later: 4:1–3) but declarative.

Christ is the goal and the pathway, Augustine would say (see Byassee 2007: 54–58). Here we see that Christ is the end of peace as well as the conduit of enjoying that peace. “He himself is our peace,” we read here. First, Christ is definitive of that peace, wherein he fulfilled the law (Matt. 5:17–21) but also knew that the law served humanity, not vice versa (Mark 2:27). He honors the law, offering his flesh and blood to bring its cultic demands to full maturation once and for all. But he also shows this process of legal provision to have a goal—namely, that p 52 blood, being given through the cross, need not be demanded anymore. Second, Christ is the pathway or way to that peace. We have peace “in Christ Jesus” alone.

Ephesians 2:14–15 does speak destructively as a means to reconstruction. God breaks down and abolishes before God creates and makes. There are earlier scriptural examples of this sort of language, perhaps none so significant as the way in which these terms are taken up in the call to Jeremiah: “See, I have set you this day over nations and over kingdoms, to pluck up and to break down, to destroy and to overthrow, to build and to plant” (Jer. 1:10). Those six infinitives define the purpose of the prophetic task, and they do so in two distinct ways: plucking up, breaking down, destroying, overthrowing (here we have the imagery of deconstruction), building, and planting (there we hear of God’s reconstructive or restorative work). Similarly, Eph. 2:14 speaks of a wall coming down just before 2:15 speaks of a new creation.

What do the verbs convey regarding God’s action? Deconstruction can and should be described first. We learn first in 2:14 that “he has broken down in his flesh the dividing wall of hostility,” and 2:16 will go further in speaking of him “killing the hostility.” Reconstruction comes second, and Paul says in 2:15 that “he might create in himself one new man in place of the two.” The language parallels 2:10, where creational imagery also appears. The language of deconstruction accents the way in which the gospel is no salve or band-aid but has to bring the promise of God’s word to the totality of our sin-riddled existence. Indeed, the word has to kill before it makes alive, to mortify prior to vivifying. The “new creation” language again (as in 2:10) speaks of the way in which grace transfigures our existence, so that nature is restored and moved toward perfection. In this case, perfection for us, socially speaking, means that the distinction of God’s own people, the Jews,

was ultimately meant to be for the Gentiles and not at the cost of the Gentiles (as rooted in texts such as Gen. 12:3a; Exod. 19:6–7).<sup>6</sup>

What do the nouns and adjectives say concerning our final state and ultimate reality? The “far off have been brought near,” and he “has made us both one.” So the gracious reality defined here is one wherein these Gentiles are near, and in being brought close to God they also are unified with the Jews. The new reality involves the presence of God, yes, but also the public consequence of that intimacy. Presence makes for a new polity in the kingdom of God; the Abrahamic promise is finding mysterious and wider eschatological fulfillment.

**p 53** More specifically, God in Christ has abolished “the law of commandments expressed in ordinances”—but what does this mean? And how does this relate to the plain fact that Paul—even in Ephesians (6:2)—will continue to employ the Israelite torah/law as moral instruction? The term translated “abolished” (*katargēsas*) by the ESV appears elsewhere in Paul, translated in all sorts of ways, as can be illustrated simply in how the ESV renders it within Romans: “nullify” (3:3), “overthrow” (3:31), “is void” (4:14), “brought to nothing” (6:6), “released” (7:2, 6). The passage where it plays a repeated, central role is 2 Cor. 3, for *katargeō* appears four times in seven verses (3:7, 11, 13, 14; see also 1 Cor. 13:8–11, where it appears three times). To get a handle on its likely semantic meaning, we are wise to look at that passage briefly and see if it sheds light on what is going on here in Eph. 2.

In 2 Cor. 3, Paul considers the story of Exod. 32–34 and argues that Moses’s face had to be covered because the glory of the Lord shone on his face in Exod. 34. The ESV translates *katargeō* in 2 Cor. 3:7, 11, and 13 as “being brought to an end” and in 3:14 as “taken away,” though it has been shown elsewhere that a more helpful rendering might be “rendered inoperative” (Hafemann 1995: 310). There the sinfulness of the Israelites rendered inoperative the witness to glory that was Moses’s face and demanded a veil, lest they be judged and condemned. How might this cast light on the use of the term in Eph. 2? Perhaps we should read Eph.

2:15 as speaking not of nullification but of limitation.

The “law of commandments” is not cast out, though it is limited in its efficacy and intent: it no longer defines those in and out. But what law is being limited? Not merely the law as such, but a law “expressed in ordinances,” which has a very Deuteronomic flavor to it.<sup>7</sup> Whereas Eph. 2:8–9 speaks much more broadly of works (*ergon*), here the law fixes more narrowly on the civic and cultic demands given Israel in its ordinances (paralleling Gal. 2:11–21 more specifically). One illustration of a broader works principle is a fixation on specific social mores and religious rites as a differentiating factor in marking out the people of God. While the soteriological principle cannot be reduced to that ecclesiological one (herein lies one error of the so-called new perspectives on Paul), that ecclesiological consequence must needs follow from the more nascent soteriological point. Paul does not oppose any ritual specification of the people of God (even Gal. 3:26–28 identifies the sign of baptism), though he does limit the present-day role of the “law of commandments” in such fashion. This side of Pentecost, the ceremonial **p 54** code of Moses will not function in terms of differentiating God’s own from the people outside the fold, for Gentiles are now by faith in Christ made one with Jewish believers.

Ephesians 2:16 speaks of “killing the hostility,” which only comes at a cost. Hostility, in other words, does not go away cheaply. Miroslav Volf has reflected on this costly peacemaking: “Without entrusting oneself to the God who judges justly, it will hardly be possible to follow the crucified Messiah and refuse to retaliate when abused. The certainty of God’s just judgment at the end of history is the presupposition for the renunciation of violence in the middle of it.”<sup>8</sup> Here in Eph. 2:16, judgment has been brought forward, highlighted by the reference to this peace coming “through the cross.” Earlier allusions to this event only highlight its reality: “by the blood of Christ” (2:13) and “in his flesh” (2:14). At and through the cross, we see God’s resolve to work reconciliation, with the Father delivering up the Son (Acts 2:23) and the Son sacrificing himself (John 10:18).

---

<sup>6</sup> Jo Bailey Wells, *God’s Holy People: A Theme in Biblical Theology*, Journal for the Study of the Old Testament Supplement Series 305 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2000).

<sup>7</sup> Parallels to Col. 2:13–23 are also notable.

<sup>8</sup> Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace: A Theological Exploration of Identity, Otherness, and Reconciliation* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1996), 302.

Christ dies and proclaims. We need to be alert to the full sweep of Paul's christological claims here, lest we truncate our sense of the peacemaking Son and his gift of peace to his fellow heirs. He does a work of reconciliation and this task involves a bloody death attested here. We also read herein of his preaching ministry not merely to those Gentiles who were crosswise from God's purposes but also to "those who were near." We need then to attend to Christ as both sacrifice and shepherd. Paul preached to the people of God who were already "near" and who were "far off"; indeed, his preaching to the "far off" was one means whereby they were brought near.

**2:18–22** For through him we both have access in one Spirit to the Father. So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God, built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus himself being the cornerstone, in whom the whole structure, being joined together, grows into a holy temple in the Lord. In him you also are being built together into a dwelling place for God by the Spirit.

The section concludes by turning to temple imagery, through which it conveys the priority of "access ... to the Father" (2:18). Access to the Father is the basis for the peace described in 2:13–17. A similar notion recurs at the conclusion of the letter, where the blessing says, "Peace be to the brothers, and love with faith, p 55 from God the Father" (6:23). Rightful presence in the Father's household brings peace in its wake. Here the syntax quickly turns somewhat haphazard and clunky, though this too is instructive. Whereas 2:18 introduces the notion of access, 2:19 turns to speak of citizenship and household membership before returning in the next verse to "dwelling place" language (which continues from 2:20 to 2:22). Indeed, the jolting incision of 2:19 likely seeks to relativize polity language to that of "presence" categories; political and familial identification will be framed by one's place within the "holy temple in the Lord" (2:21).

What can be said about this temple? First, it is "built on the foundation of the apostles and the prophets" (2:20). Why accent apostles with the first mention? Apostles herald the newness of the Christ's coming and passion, and therefore they are privileged here. That being said, the prophets of old

also merit mention and are in no way expunged as structural elements of this churchly scaffolding. "Prophets" likely refers to those Israelite heralds inasmuch as the letter has not addressed present-day prophetic activity (though that will come later: 4:11), and the immediate context has been ruminating on the ongoing implications of God's former revelation. In both cases—apostolic and prior prophetic testimony—authorized speech of those emissaries of the Son serves a fundamental role in his upbuilding of this new community (4:7–12).

Second, Paul goes to say of the temple, "Christ Jesus himself [is] the cornerstone" (2:20). There is some debate regarding the precise translation of the term *akrogōniaion*. Is it a headstone or a cornerstone? Expounding Ps. 87:1–3 and its reference to the city's "foundations upon the mountains" in light of Christ as cornerstone in Eph. 2:20, Augustine wrestles with the question: "How then can both be true—that the prophets and apostles are the foundations, and that Christ Jesus is the foundation, beside whom there can be no other?" Considering that psalm, he says, "How are we to think of it, except that as he is properly said to be the Holy One of all holy ones, so he is figuratively called the foundation of foundations?" (Augustine 2002: 248). While "cornerstone" tends to be preferred, the fundamental image is just the same. Both stones serve an abiding significance and an ongoing active role. It is this insistent activity that is highlighted here, for the text goes on to say, "in whom the whole structure, being joined together, grows into a holy temple in the Lord" (2:21). Christ's central role does not get reduced to antiquity and yesteryear but finds expression in ongoing terms. Oriented around him, the church grows up.

Third, the Holy Spirit plays a highlighted role here. Ephesians 2:18 said that our access to the Father was through Christ and "in one Spirit." Verse 22 recurs to p 56 this claim, saying, "In him you also are being built together into a dwelling place for God by the Spirit." Actually, the repetition is even tighter than the English suggests, because the phrasing repeats (*en pneumati*, "in the Spirit" albeit with and without *heni*, "one"). The language of "the Spirit" (2:18, 22) echoes that of 1:3 ("every spiritual blessing," *en pasē eulogia pneumatikē*).

Fourth, the language beginning 2:22 echoes that of 1:13: "In him you also." The christological point also introduces this whole section, for 2:18



says that “through him” access to the Father can be enjoyed. We rightly come to the conclusion of this section by attending to this christological focus, for that reminds us that 2:11–22, like 2:1–10 before it, exemplifies the same divine power (1:18–19) that was initially manifest in action directed toward (though not terminating on) Jesus Christ (1:20–22). His resurrection, the sinner’s salvation by grace, and the building together of one new temple in the Lord are not mere products of power. We must read 1:19 alongside 1:18, for there were three things to be known: our hope, our glorious inheritance, and the triune God’s might toward believers.

While the resurrection of Jesus obviously unites hope, the Son’s inheritance, and God’s own power, we must confess that these next two manifestations of divine power in 2:1–10 and 2:11–22 flow no less from that nexus. John Webster speaks of this christological inclusion: “We are because he is. We are only because he is. That is what is meant by faith in the gospel’s God: living trustfully from the work and communicative presence of creator, redeemer and perfecter, and so being free to lay aside the wretched responsibility for securing ourselves, which is one of the bitterest fruits of the fall. But because he is, we really are. His exaltation is the sure ground of creaturely being and the promise of proper creaturely glory” (Webster 2007).

Sinners and societies that need divine intervention experience it “in him,” so this notion of christological inclusion or union is no small matter. In a vivid sense, we see here how the epistle can begin by addressing its audience as “saints” and “faithful ones,” to be sure, but only “in Christ Jesus.” Still further, we must remember that those in Christ receive the blessing of that greeting, “grace to you and peace.” Perhaps more explicitly and directly than any other portions of this epistle, Eph. 2:1–10 illustrates that grace and 2:11–22 manifests that peace.