

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

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□ cross-reference to within this commentary on passages in Ephesians

<sup>4</sup> The book of Numbers also includes a sevenfold de-creation account in picking out seven of the ten grumbings 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.

Gentiles. We see that Jews spoke of them and named them. And at least one significant naming 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” (*τῆς πολιτείας τοῦ Ἰσραὴλ*) 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 (*τοῦ Ἰσραὴλ*). 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

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

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 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

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□ cross-reference to within this commentary on passages in Ephesians

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

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□ cross-reference to within this commentary on passages in Ephesians

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” (*katarēsas*) 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 *katarēō* 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 *katarēō* 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 (*ergōn*), 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

<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).

□ cross-reference to within this commentary on passages in Ephesians

ESV English Standard Version

ESV English Standard Version

ESV English Standard Version

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

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).

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 *akrogōniaiou*: 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

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

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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.<sup>1</sup>

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