

The Church as heir to the promises, bride of Christ

(Eph. 2:11-22)

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Introduction: Our world is intensely divided these days on every side, from politics to culture, from economics to religion, nationally, internationally, and locally!

- From the Catalonia referendum to Brexit and the divided condition of political parties (Spain, US, Europe), from the freedom bus that's revealing lines of tolerance and intolerance, to parliamentary woes being suffered in many countries, it feels like an earthquake is shaking the foundations of our world, as if we've begun to reap the harvest of the immorality, permissiveness, materialism, and unbelief that characterized the second half of the 20th century.
- So people are at each other's throats, unable to agree, quarreling, angry, entrenched in opposing positions, name-calling, building walls to keep others out, tightening restrictions against undesirables – those who are different from us, those who don't think like we do, those whom we need protection from.
- The book of James gives us a spiritual perspective on all of this: "What causes fights and quarrels among you? Don't they come from your desires that battle within you? You want something but don't get it. You kill and covet, but you cannot get what you want. You quarrel and fight. You do not have because you do not ask God. When you ask, you do not receive because you ask with wrong motives, that you may spend what you get on your pleasures. You adulterous people, don't you know that friendship with the world is hatred toward God?" (Jas. 4:1-4). In other words, all the disunity and divisiveness spring from a serious spiritual problem in the heart of humankind.
- And where is all this divisiveness and hatred overcome? Yes, it's at the cross, but what we fail to remember is that the church is intended to be a model of a united society operating under God's rule. That doesn't mean we pretend to be better than anybody else – in fact, we have to be on our knees constantly asking God to keep us humble, to keep us on track, clinging to our life-raft, who is Jesus, confessing that anything good that happens in our midst is not because of us. We're not the source of it – it all comes from Him, the One who laid down His life on our behalf to redeem us from **the misery of self-rule**, to rescue us from the deception of doing

things my way and getting just what I want. How truly miserable that is, leading to bankruptcy and ruin. Just remember the Proverb, “There is a way that seems right to a man [my way!], but the end thereof is the way of death” (14:12).

- In our Scripture passage for today (Eph. 2), we see how God overcomes our penchant for self-rule and fighting; our tendency to impose our criteria and preferences; our inclination to judge and look down on each other; to establish classes, categories, elites, divisiveness, exclusiveness; to build walls of protectionism, etc. How does God put up with such unruly children, such wayward, rebellious creatures?

1) Our passage in Eph. 2 begins by describing what “B.C.” life was like (“Before Christ”). Paul was speaking primarily to those who were “Gentiles by birth and called ‘uncircumcised’ by those who call themselves the circumcision” (v.11). The Jews referred to themselves as the “circumcision” because of the sign given to Abraham.

- The Jewish community felt a strong need to make careful distinctions between those who were ‘*in*’ and those who were ‘*out*.’ The term “Gentile” simply designated any person from another nation, any non-Jew. “Uncircumcised” also referred to non-Jews, those who didn’t have the mark of Abraham in their flesh, the sign God had given him that even the most intimate part of his flesh belonged to God and desperately needed to be under God’s rule! Anyone who didn’t have that sign was automatically excluded, judged inferior, because the Jews had badly interpreted God’s gifts to mean favoritism.

- So the condition of these outsiders was this (v.12): separated from Christ, excluded from citizenship in Israel, foreigners to the covenants of the promise, without hope, without God in the world. What a devastating condition, which actually describes the situation of anyone who does not know Christ as Savior and Lord.

- But notice how in v.13 it all gets reversed thanks to Christ: “Now in Christ Jesus you who were once far away have been brought near through the blood of Christ.” The “far away” ones were, of course, the Gentiles, far from God, from Israel, and from salvation. But now in Christ, they’ve been “brought near,” so no longer separate from Christ, no longer excluded from citizenship in Israel, no longer foreigners to the covenants, but partakers, heirs of the promise, full of hope and “Emmanuel” (= God with us!). The truth is we humans are incapable of “just getting along” – we simply can’t do that on our own (we are the ultimate “rock/paper/scissors”). We needed Jesus to come and break down all the walls between us and the blockage within us, and how did He do it? V.13 says it was “through His blood.” That’s worth exploring in depth.

2) V.14 says that **Jesus is “our peace,”** meaning He’s the One who brought about reconciliation, the One who brings us together, teaches us how to get along and overcome our differences and accept one another.

- This is demonstrated in the fact that He “made the two one”: those who were “far away” and those who were “near” refers to the Gentiles and the Jews. These former enemies have been reconciled and become one in Jesus, because He destroyed the barrier between them; He broke down the dividing wall of hostility.

- Have in mind here that in the temple there were literal walls that divided the different courts from each other: the Gentiles were forbidden from entering the inner courts on penalty of death.

Paul surely has that wall in mind when he says the dividing wall of hostility has been destroyed! And he explains that Jesus did this by abolishing the law in His flesh (on the cross) with all its commandments and regulations – those that required circumcision, those forbidding Gentiles from entering the temple, those requiring continuous animal sacrifices, etc.

- Someone may remember that Jesus said in Mt. 5 that He hadn't come to "abolish" the law and prophets, but to fulfill them. So is Paul contradicting Jesus here? No way! The Greek word used here, *katalúo*, actually means "undo" or "destroy." In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus was making clear that He had not come to this earth to act as an adversary of the law, though some thought this was the case since He didn't follow the strict interpretations of the Pharisees. But Jesus' goal would never be to frustrate the law's fulfillment, because He revered it, obeyed it, and brought it to fruition, fulfilling all the law's prophetic signs regarding Himself, fulfilling all its moral demands, which called for perfect obedience.

- What He did was to render no longer active the ceremonial parts of the law because they came to fulfillment in His sacrificial death, like a check that's been paid or canceled (Greek *katargéo*), hence no longer binding. As Jesus fulfilled the ceremonial law's prophecies, those ceremonial regulations were no longer binding, so He was thereby canceling the basis for all the differentiation between Jews and Gentiles – between all races, social classes, genders. There was no longer a basis for discrimination, prejudice, fighting, or looking down noses at anybody.

- So in Himself Jesus had now created the **new humanity** (the "one new man") that doesn't depend on ceremonies or rituals for cleansing. All the cleansing you'll ever need is **right here in this one body**, where both Jew and Gentile have been reconciled to God and to each other through the cross – where He put to death their hostility. How's that for a metaphor? Jesus "killed hostility!" – that's the way to real peace!

3) But HOW did He do this amazing feat? How did He put hostility to death?! Understanding this requires careful meditation. As He was dying on the cross, He provided the perfect sacrifice fulfilling all the prophetic symbolism of the Old Testament – the sacrifice none of us could ever have made.

- **Being made right with God** was therefore no longer about fulfilling rules and regulations, since all ceremonial requirements were now being canceled. This meant that Jews and Gentiles could now eat together: dietary rules no longer applied (Mk. 7:19). They could also worship together: there was no need for sacrifices, priests, or temple any more (Jn. 4:23-24). ALL the barriers were coming down! The hostility was dying.

- As Jesus was unjustly sentenced to death (the worst breach of justice in history), with false accusations, slander, and dishonoring His name, what was His response? No complaining or self-pity, but only acceptance. As He received all those undeserved insults and ridicule, He did not answer in kind, but showed only mercy. As He submitted to all the humiliation and cruelty, there was no bitterness or malice, but only understanding, compassion, and forgiveness. He chose to forgive every wretched thing they did to Him – He canceled the debt: injustice, lying, treason? "Debt canceled." Dishonor, disgrace, ridicule, mocking, humiliation? "Debt canceled." Cruelty and meanness, spitting in His face, hitting Him on the head, beating Him? "Debt canceled." That's the peace He came and proclaimed to those who were far away and to those who were near, to those who had no advantages and to those who had all the advantages.

- Is there anyone you're withholding forgiveness from (just because you know you were right and they were wrong)? It's poison – why would you want to hold it in? Nail it to that tree! You see, the closer you are to someone, the more potential you have to hurt each other. That's why we put up walls. It's why we avoid getting too close, because we know what it's like to be hurt. But we can't have true community and we can't experience serious nourishing love, unless we're willing to risk. That's what Jesus was doing on the cross: making Himself totally vulnerable, letting us do all our worst to Him and refusing to hold it against us, thereby putting hostility to death, so that you and I could risk forgiving – in His name, trusting His example. Sometimes the only way to get healing is to peel off a scab and open up the wound – that's what confession and repentance are all about.

4) Jesus went through all that pain and suffering on the cross so that His people could be **free of all contamination**, every spot and blemish: every basis for disunity and divisiveness was put to death at the cross.

- In the Old Testament, the tribes that God called out of Egypt became His own people, His flock, His bride (metaphors). But Israel as a flock tended to wander off the path; as a people they often fought and warred among themselves; as the Bride of Yahweh Israel was unfaithful again and again, and sometimes Old Testament prophets even spoke of divorce, but it was only a metaphor – God would never abandon His people. He's always faithful to His Word and covenant promises.

- The **New Testament takes up this same imagery of God the Shepherd and God the Husband**, and shows how He continues to be faithful by sending His Son to fulfill all the promises. As Shepherd, He would gather the lost sheep of Israel and guide them safely into the fold. As Bridegroom, He would rescue His bride and overcome her problem of adultery, even paying the penalty of her unfaithfulness by washing her with His own blood and with the Word. Other metaphors add to the richness: as Head of the Body, He would protect and care for His body (the church); as God and King, He would dwell in the temple (composed of His people). Jesus thus becomes the "Yes" to all God's covenant promises (2 Cor. 1:20), so that in Christ you and I become the seed of Abraham, heirs of the promises (Gal. 3:29). Grafted into the true Olive (Rom. 11), we are also the true circumcision, says Paul (Php. 3:3), we who worship by the Spirit of God, who glory in Christ Jesus and put no confidence in the flesh.

- So the church is in fact the bride that Yahweh had always longed for. Scripture uses this most intimate marriage metaphor to talk about our relationship with God because our souls crave more than information, more than mere communication of facts. We long for communion, deep love that values us for more than the physical (because we know the physical won't last!). And the husband, our Lord Jesus, tenderly calls to His bride, assuring her that she will be radiant beyond all her dreams, which she cannot be apart from His Spirit, so He is coming for His bride to share His eternal glory with her. The time of the Bride's preparation is now, fixing her eyes on the Bridegroom and finding all her joy in witnessing for Him, doing His will, and honoring His name.