

One New People

I had been building a relationship with an acquaintance in our city, but hit a stone wall when I urged him to



Michael K. Olmsted

accept Christ. Without animosity he explained: "I've watched churches all my life and notice you fight over all kinds of ideas and doctrines. I can't see myself becoming part of a religion that always seems to be fighting while claiming to represent God's love." Not only in the divisions of Christianity, but in a world of varied religions ideas, traditions and behavior are so deeply imbedded that they divide us rather than unite. Enter the Apostle Paul, formerly a religious extremist who mastered the art of rules and rituals. This Pharisee was transformed by God's love into a crusader for grace and love in Jesus Christ.

For the Gentile Christians of Ephesus Paul states that before this world and all its people existed, God's plan was to call out a holy and blameless people to love and serve God (Ephesians 1:4). The foundation for such a people was not ethnicity or exclusivity, but a common relationship with God. A common prayer of first century Jewish men was an expression of gratitude, thanking God that they were not born a Gentile, a woman or a slave! Jesus used this negative example of a Pharisee publicly praying: "I thank Thee (God) that I am not like other people, swindlers, unjust, adulterers, or even like tax-gatherers. I fast ..." (while) "the tax-gatherer, standing some distance away, was unwilling to lift his eyes up to heaven, but was beating his breast, saying, 'God be merciful to me, the sinner'" (Luke 18:12-13).

That picture reminds us that self-sufficient religion cannot substitute for an honest longing for God. Every person has the same deep need for God's love and help, not just to get through the garbage of life, but to become whole and generous in this unbalanced world. Paul forcefully described this idea of oneness to that early church: "There is neither Jew nor Greek; there is neither slave nor free; nor is there male or female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus" (Galatians 3:28).

Ephesians is written to non-Jewish

followers of Jesus, reminding them they were once "without Christ...aliens rather than citizens of Israel, and strangers to the covenants of God's promise. In this world (they) had no hope in God" (2:11-12). Like the original recipients of this letter, we must understand that without Christ we would have no hope, and without the encouragement of our family or friends we would not know the hope of Christ.

"Christ is our peace" (v. 14), Paul explains, because Christ has broken down the walls between people and God and between the peoples of this world. This has been accomplished by the blood of Christ (v. 13). The idea that Jews and Gentiles could be united in God's kingdom was revolutionary in Paul's day.

Paul speaks of "the barrier of hatred that divides us" (v. 14), a possible reference to the arrangement of the Jerusalem Temple. The Temple was divided by courtyards: 1) court of the Gentiles; 2) court of the women; 3) court of the Israelites; 4) court of the priests; and finally, the actual Temple with two inner chambers (Holy Place and Holy of Holies). There were warning signs on the walls of the court of women announcing that any Gentile found there would be executed instantly. This adds to our understanding of Paul's words that "With his body, (Jesus) broke down the barrier of hatred that divided us. He canceled the rules of the Law so that we could create one new person out of the two groups, making peace" (vv. 14-15).

Beyond any rigid religious ideology, Christ unites us in one family of faith. This does not mean all religions morph together or that faith is a syrupy agreement where everybody is wonderful. This is the unequaled gift of God through his only begotten Son, in whom we may become what God intended us to be!

Continuing the relationship idea of faith, Paul declares that, in Christ, "we are no longer strangers and aliens...you are fellow citizens with God's people, and you belong to God's household" (v.19). Again, the contrast is between a rigid religious system and a fellowship where people care for and support each other.

Paul is careful to remind all of us that we did not imagine or create this household of faith. It's built on "the

Formations

January 15, 2017

Scripture: Ephesians 2:11-22

foundation of the apostles and prophets" (v. 20). God began with Abraham, followed by a long line of patriarchs, prophets and apostles. Each one, flaws and all, pointed us to Christ. But this new family, the temple of flesh and spirit, is built "with Christ Jesus himself as the cornerstone" (v. 20). The cornerstone holds the building together. We may debate lesser ideas but we must always remember Jesus Christ is the Savior, Son of God and answer to all our questions.

Paul moves beyond the wonder of what God has accomplished for us in Christ to our purpose as his people. "Christ is building you into a place where God lives through the Spirit" (v. 22). Ephesians repeatedly refers to the Spirit of God who energizes and guides us. When I trusted Christ with my life as a high school student, I had well-meaning friends who insisted that as a believer I must now seek the baptism of the Holy Spirit. I went to "Holy Spirit revivals," read pamphlets, studied and prayed. The Apostle Paul helped me see that when Christ comes into one's heart, so does the Spirit to nurture, inspire and guide you daily. Paul encourages us to "be filled with the Spirit" (Ephesians 5:18) and "offer prayers and petitions in the Spirit at all times" (Ephesians 6:18). The Spirit is God's abiding presence in every moment of our living. But we must pay attention, seek to honor God in our words and actions and be faithful members of the family of God.

Being part of a family does not mean we all have the same personality, agree in every thought, and practice perfect love. But if we remember that God has invited us, Jesus has made our inclusion possible, and the Spirit seeks to help us grow healthy spiritually and serve God faithfully, then we can be one new people. Our world is isolated by so many walls of hatred, prejudice, selfishness. May God's grace empower us to offer this suffering world the hope of God and a new way to live.

Retired after more than 45 years in pastoral ministry, Michael K. Olmsted enjoys family, supply preaching and interim work, literature, history, the arts and antiques.