

God is glorified in his unified church

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[0 : 0 0] That was Ephesians 2 verse 11. 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. 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. For this reason I, Paul, a prisoner of Christ Jesus on behalf of you Gentiles, assuming that you have heard of the stewardship of God's grace that was given to me for you, how the mystery was made known to me by revelation, as I have written briefly.

When you read this, you can perceive my insight into the mystery of Christ, which was not made known to the sons of men in other generations, as it has now been revealed to his holy apostles and prophets by the Spirit.

[2 : 1 4] This mystery is that the Gentiles are fellow heirs, members of the same body and partakers of the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel. Of this gospel I was made a minister according to the gift of God's grace, which was given me by the working of his power.

To me, though I am the very least of all the saints, this grace was given to preach to the Gentiles the unsearchable riches of Christ and to bring to light for everyone what is the plan of the mystery hidden for ages in God, who created all things, so that through the church the manifold wisdom of God might now be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly places.

This was according to the eternal purpose that he has realized in Christ Jesus our Lord, in whom we have boldness and access with confidence through our faith in him.

Well, good morning, everyone. Why don't we pray as we come to God's word? Father, my simple prayer is that you would give us a vision of your church that you have.

And I pray this in Jesus' name. Amen. Well, I don't think this is a profound statement, but we all crave connection, don't we?

[3 : 5 6] Studies have shown that a newborn child, deprived of all physical touch, have serious issues growing up, all physical touch.

Solitary confinement in prison is one of the worst punishments you can inflict on a human being. And even that relational connection is one of the best ways to overcome addictions of various kinds.

We all crave connection, community. But don't we try and do it on my terms? A child wants to be part of the family, but despises sharing the household chores or their parents saying no.

We want the hospitals and the roads and the protection of police and the justice system, but we hate paying taxes. We want to be part of the sports team, but only when it's convenient for me.

I even heard of a local amateur sports team where the coach paid the players to come to training. And as the season went on, they still didn't come.

[5 : 10] We want to be married. We want that deep intimacy and common purpose, but do we really want to submit all our choices to our spouse? And we just settle for transactional relating.

I'll do this if you do that. You might want to fully belong to this church family, but if you only give yourself to others and what's going on here when it's convenient and safe and requiring little sacrifice, just don't be surprised if you don't feel very connected.

But then we know from other cultures and from history that the antidote to that isn't to elevate the group, the family, the nation, the church, as supreme to the point where the individual is lost altogether.

It gives all the power to those in charge where the individual life can become very, very cheap. And it can create division between groups, between families, between tribes and nations that the bloodshed in history shows us that that doesn't work either.

So I think we're kind of stuck. We crave connection as human beings and we try and have it on our own terms, but it doesn't work. It keeps us at arm's length self-protection and unity that lasts is almost impossible to maintain.

[6 : 50] We saw in Genesis, before the fall, before sin entered the world, how central in God's purposes that God wants a people. We hear it in the command to fill the earth with his people.

We hear the Lord's surprising declaration to Adam, who is in paradise, relating to the Lord, it's not good to be alone. He needs someone of the same flesh, the same nature to relate to.

We have here not only the commencement of marriage, but the start of the human race under Adam and Eve. What should have spread was Adam's family ever increasing and worshipping the Lord without any shame, only blessing.

So as we come to the end of our sermon series, we've covered a lot of ground, haven't we? We've gone on so many topics. But it would be incomplete and it would be tragically distorted if we viewed everything we've covered so far, if we viewed it individualistically.

So if we think of the Christian hope of heaven as simply me being resurrected so that I can see the Lord face to face, now that's true and it's wonderful, but it's incomplete.

[8 : 16] If we understand that the Lord is personal and he speaks through his word to me, I can know him through his word. That's true, but it's not complete.

The sovereign creator is still sovereign and he's working all things for my good to conform me to the likeness of his son. That's true, but he's got a bigger goal than that.

That I can know the triune creator, God as father, because I belong to the son filled with his spirit. Again, individualistically, that's true, but it's more than that.

That I'm made for worship, to love, trust and obey God, build my life on God, not some created thing. That sin is trying to be in control when really God is the one who should be in control.

That I'm made in the likeness of God, to be like God, to reflect the glory of God as I go about in the world. All these things, individualistically, is true, but it's incomplete.

[9 : 23] It's not God's picture. Of what he intended creation to be, not the full picture. Because we see in Genesis that God's goal is rest and at the heart of rest is God dwelling with his worshipping people.

One way to understand the story of scripture is to look at it through the theme of two competing, two alternatives to community.

One is a man-made community with man at the centre and the other is a God-made community with God at the centre. So we see this at the end of scripture in Revelation where you've got the city of Babylon, man-made, living life for self, but it comes to an end.

What city lasts? God's city. But we see this theme starting off in Genesis. We come to it in Genesis 11 where we've got the Tower of Babel.

And here at the Tower of Babel, you've got people sinfully trying to go, let us make a name for ourselves. Now what are they trying to do?

[10 : 47] They're trying to build a kingdom without the king. Let us make a name not for God but for ourselves. Let's build a society where we've got security, where we've got our own purpose, where we're going to get all the acclaim ourselves, where we're going to guarantee our future.

It's trying to build a kingdom just without the king. So that's one option. And we've been trying ever since. Building community without God at the centre.

But then in Genesis 12, God steps in, calls Abraham out, and he starts his program to build a people for himself.

So the rest of the Old Testament zooms in on Abraham's descendants, the nation of Israel. But in the end, even this privileged nation who had God speaking to them, all the privileges in the world, even they, instead of being a light to the nations to draw them in, they end up becoming like the nations.

So we can see there's two communities, two alternatives. One is man-made, God-made.

[12 : 07] One is man-centred. One is God-centred. So if the nation of Israel didn't work, does that mean that God's desire for a people failed?

Did it fail? And here we come to Ephesians. I think Ephesians says it most explicitly and clearly, which is why we're going to look at it today.

Here we have in Ephesians 3, so open your Bibles to Ephesians 3, we'll be spending our time here, 2 and 3. In Ephesians 3, we're told that God has had a greater plan than just national Israel, that he is moving all history towards this goal.

Paul says that God, the creator of all things, had an eternal purpose in mind, an everlasting goal in mind, but that God had kept it a mystery.

Now, that word mystery doesn't mean it's totally unknowable. It doesn't mean it's like a murder mystery, where if you just picked the right pieces, you could have worked it out yourself.

[13 : 22] It's more like MasterChef, where you've got the mystery box. You don't know what's under that mystery box until the lid is lifted. It's real. It's just hidden. So God had a plan from the start, and he gave himself testimony throughout the Old Testament, so it's not like this came out of nowhere, but he has lifted the lid, Paul is saying.

He has revealed it to the apostles and prophets. What could be so important to the creator, the climactic purpose of history, this mystery that he's now revealed, this mystery is so profound that when angels and heavenly realities look at it, they are in amazement.

Now, either I'm not saying this properly, which is possible, or you're asleep, or you're addicted to your smartphone, something chronic, or you are so confident in your own purpose to life that you don't care what the creator's is.

I mean, like the creator of the world has a mystery and he's revealed it. What is it? Verse 6, this mystery is that the nations, the Gentiles, that's you if you're not a Jew, that's me, our fellow heirs, members of the same body, partakers of the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel.

Verse 9 tells us the purpose in all this, to bring to light for everyone what is the plan of the mystery hidden for ages in God who created all things so that through the church, the church, the manifold wisdom of God might now be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly places.

[15 : 17] God lifts the lid of his eternal plan to the apostles, they preach it through the gospel message throughout the world and the society that this gospel creates, heavenly realities are looking at the society and going, wow, God is incredible.

The world might see the church as outdated and irrelevant, a weird bunch of people, sorry, who need a crutch to get through life, maybe even bigoted, intolerant, dangerous.

The world might see the church that way. You might see it as useful at times. Surround your kids with other moral kids, the occasional uplifting sermon, a bit of relationship.

Maybe a necessary duty. God sees it as the climax of his created purposes. He sees his unified church as central to his eternal purpose because it's through the unified church that the Lord is glorified.

How is the Lord glorified in the church? sin has alienated us from God.

[16 : 50] We hear that regularly but it's also alienated us from one another. Sin has created hostility between us and God but it's also created hostility between one another.

And in the church, Christ has achieved a double reconciliation. Here in the second half of Ephesians 2, the focus is on the divide between Jew and Gentile which I'm taking this as a greater to lesser point.

This is the greatest divide there is between societies, the chosen people of God and everyone else. if this war can be broken down, any war can be broken down.

I think we need to remember and I don't think this, Ephesians 2, Ephesians 2, God says that we need to remember, verse 11, at one time what our condition was.

We need to remember what our condition was so that we can marvel at his grace. We live in a time when personal choice is just all that matters basically.

[18 : 11] Like, yeah, of course I can belong to the church if I want to. Yes, you can walk in these doors and attend but you had no right and me, you had no right to belong to God's spiritual heavenly church based on your choice.

Before we came to Christ in faith, our spiritual condition was utterly hopeless, we're told. We were separated from Christ, we were alienated from Israel, we were tourists, we had no rights, got all God's promises to Israel, not for you.

No promises to you. We were hopeless, and we were without God, we had no true knowledge of God and if we don't have God, what do we really have?

Nothing in the end. I think our far away condition is pictured in the temple, the physical temple that existed when Paul was writing this in Jerusalem.

So, you want to be close to God, his name dwelling in the temple? Well, you've got, first of all, you've got the inner court for the priests who were serving and then you've got another area after that for the men of Israel and then another area for the women of Israel and then you went down a bunch of steps and behind a thick wall and then everyone else, if you're not a Jew, you can go there.

[19 : 45] And there was a sign which basically said, you cross this wall, your death is on your hands. I think that just gives us a taste of spiritually how far we were from God before we knew Christ.

That's not saying that Jews didn't need the gospel. The gospel was preached to them who were near. They had every privilege. They still needed their sins forgiven. But we were a long, long way off.

Verse 13, but now, God has acted to change all that. But now, in Christ Jesus, you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ.

Christ, in his flesh, has broken down every dividing wall of hostility between people. Verse 18 is the climax.

For through him, through Christ, we both, Jew and Gentile, every person with faith, through him, we both have access in one spirit to the Father.

[21 : 01] That's the kind of God he is. He wants us to have full access and he's now created that in Jesus. He's broken down the law that keeping the law produces self-righteousness and condemns anyone who's not keeping the law.

Jew and Gentile all come in on the basis of faith, all come in on the basis of grace. It is by his death we are all forgiven.

It is by being united to him that we all live. God was rightfully wrathful toward our rebellion and we hated his claim to rule over our lives.

But Jesus kills, I love the wording, he kills the hostility. He murdered the hostility by himself being murdered.

that sin that produced the wrath at us is gone. And now when we look at God we don't see a condemning judge that we actually hate and we don't want him to control our lives.

[22 : 17] We go, wow, if you are this loving, go ahead, control my life. He kills the hostility between man and God and God. But he also breaks down the wall of hostility between people and people, Jew and Gentile.

God because it's by grace alone that we belong to God, that we are near to God. There is no separation between people.

I thought of the story of Jim Elliott, a missionary, and four others who were killed when they tried to take the gospel to Ecuador, to a tribe in Ecuador.

You might have heard this story before. One of the guys who was killed along with Jim Elliott was Nate Saint. So when they arrived, the tribe speared these men to death.

They didn't have a chance to speak the gospel. Now, why, like, I saw pictures of them as I was preparing this and they're in their 30s, young and married, got young children.

[23 : 35] Why they took this risk in the first place is pretty astonishing. But even more incredible than their sacrifice for the gospel is that eventually the tribe did welcome the wives, the bereaved wives in, and the gospel went to this tribe.

And Steve Saint, who was only five years old, he grew up in this tribe, and he befriended the men who murdered his dad, and he was, sorry, he was baptized by them, and embraced as a son in the tribe.

Like, what is that? What is that? That you can genuinely love the people who murdered your dad? Like, what is that? That's the church.

That's what Christ has done. This wasn't faking. This is real peace. Christ didn't die to merely create an institution or social movement.

A key phrase is in verse 16. So that he might, the second half of 16, that he might create in himself one new man in place of the two, so making peace.

[25 : 11] Now, notice that isn't plural. Yes, when we come to Christ, we are made new, we are born again, but this is singular. This is talking about the church, picturing the church as a whole, the spiritual church.

Christ has one new man. What it's saying is Christ has created a new humanity. It's not just an institution, it's not just a movement, it's a new human race.

One flesh, his flesh, his body. So just reflect, do you see the church that way? Do you see the church as just a local community that help one another out?

Or do you see the church as a new human race? Now, I'm mindful that that phrasing sounds pretty arrogant.

It almost sounds like superior race kind of language, but this race is created and motivated by grace. It's knowing how much we don't deserve it.

[26 : 21] And it's animated by his spirit, the same spirit who chose to be killed to make peace. I don't think it creates superiority.

I think it creates, well, I feel like Jim Elliot and Nate saying, a new humanity. And then we're given three pictures of what this unity looks like.

The first one is we are fellow citizens of the kingdom. There's no need to have an imposter syndrome in the church if you're riddled with sin and shame.

If you're filled with sin and shame, you may not feel like you belong here right now. We can even feel like that when we're underdressed and things like that. We don't need to feel that way. You are full citizens of the kingdom by faith in Christ.

You're not an outsider. You're not even a permanent resident. You're a full citizen. The second picture adds a more intimate note.

[27 : 27] We are members of his household. We have one father. We're in the true royal family. I don't think this is sentimental language like our workplaces want to talk about our work family.

They just want you to do your job properly. That's just sentimental language I think. This blood that runs through this family is more precious than any human blood.

You better get used to the people sitting around you. You're going to be with them for a very, very long time. But I also want to be real about it.

We have serious differences in this room. I heard someone describe it as we don't look at each other and go, wow, I just feel so much affection for you.

We look at each other and go, I'm surprised you're in the family of God. Now, there's something wrong about that joke too, but there are serious differences.

[28 : 39] Let's not downplay those, but I think the beauty of Christ is seen when despite all those differences we can unite in worship in the same Christ.

When we genuinely display brotherly love, despite those differences, differences, that's when the wisdom of the cross is displayed in all its fullness.

So we are full citizens of the kingdom. There is a brotherhood united in sacrificial love for one another. And the third picture is that of the temple.

God has this grand building project. He's building his home to live in. This living temple isn't about your body being the picture of health.

It's about relationships in the church are meant to be the picture of health. And Christ underpins this structure. He is the cornerstone.

[29 : 38] We are built on him. What governs our church is his word through the apostles and prophets. It's not what you think. It's not what I think.

But we sit under the authority of his word. That's how we are built up. And it's a permanent building. The world is busy creating organizations.

The average organization I heard the other day lasts for 30 to 40 years, the average business. Everything the world is trying to build will collapse. But this building project is permanent because Christ has risen.

It's in him. It's built on him. His temple is forever. So all these pictures of the new humanity that Christ has created, full citizens, members of one family, a living temple for God to dwell in.

I think it tells us something about the nature of God, what he's like. God is a uniting God. He's an in-gathering God.

[30 : 45] He's a peace-loving God. So I'm hesitant to say the next line.

It's almost blasphemous, but I don't think it is. God doesn't want to think of himself apart from his people is the import I'm getting from this.

He wants to dwell in his people. Christ wants to be the head of his body, the church. He wants to be united more than a husband and wife is united.

God is a uniting God between God and man, between man and man, and heaven and earth. That's his goal. United in the love of Christ, God is glorified in his united church.

So if God's plan since creation has now been revealed to be the unity of his church, and if Christ gave his blood to create a new and eternal people for God, how can we approach church from our own self-interest?

[32 : 08] It's not what we're called to, it's not who we are, and it's not what we're called to. The glory of God is seen in individuals being saved, but that's not the end of the story.

We have a high calling to be the church, the resurrected new community. We're meant to be showing the world a different way. We are called to display to the heavens, whoever they are watching, the glory of God.

what an incredible purpose. Imagine the difference it would make if we didn't approach church according to what I got out of it, but if we saw the church as what we are.

We are his body, we are his kingdom, we are his new humanity, we are one family. Imagine if we thought of ourselves that way. go away however the spirit is convicting.

Let's think about that. None of us view the church fully as we ought to, as God does. We've all got to grow in this area. As our society tries to define itself more and more by what an individual does, we can show a better way.

[33 : 38] We can be so secure in ourselves because we know who we are. I don't have to prove who I am, I don't have to find who I am, I know who I am, I am his church, I belong to him.

As our society increasingly mistrusts authority, anyone in authority because it threatens personal choice, we need to focus on being the church to show a better way.

If we see the unity of the church that those who are given authority are to use it like serving another member in the body, just wanting the one body to thrive, and those who are under authority, I will give myself to those above me because in the end I'm doing it for my head, I'm doing it for Christ's sake.

Imagine if we showed a different way of doing authority. Or as our society increasingly takes offence at disagreement and cancels and divorces, we need to focus on being the church, knowing we are all saved by grace.

Imagine the community of people who said, I deeply disagree with you on that, but I'm going to keep dying for you because you're my brother, you're my sister.

[34 : 57] I really disagree, but by my actions and words, I still love you. Imagine if we sat under the authority of God's word and patiently tried to persuade each other on issues.

I think this view of church will increase our grief because we all know the church and myself and myself, we all don't live up to this vision.

It increases our grief that we have robbed God of his glory when we stuff this up. But I don't think we should be disillusioned because the creator whose goal is his unified church to his glory has promised that the bride will be adorned.

We will have the glory of God so we can keep growing, we can keep pursuing peace and unity. if you see the glory of God depending on our genuine unity in the love of Christ in the church, then hear the call in Ephesians 4.

I urge you to walk in a manner worthy of the calling to which you have been called with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, eager to maintain the unity of the spirit in the bond of peace.

[36 : 53] God is at stake. We have this high calling to show the heavens and the world a different way, that the new creation has begun here in the church universal.

I urge you to walk in a manner worthy of the calling to which you have been called. show the world a better way. Let's pray.

Father, I pray that out of an understanding of what Christ has achieved, that knowing that we have unity, not that we have to create it, but that we have to maintain it, I pray that you would be convicting each one of us where we need to be.

I pray that where there's hostility in relationships in this room, that you would give us the resources and the help and the perspective to seek real peace.

Lord, I pray that when disagreements arise, that we will submit to your authority and seek your glory and not our own sense of justice.

[38 : 26] Lord, I pray that we would not just love with words, but we would love in actions and in truth, in the way that we carry each other's burdens and bear each other's sorrows and urge one another on to live for you.

So, Lord, I pray that you would however we need to change, I pray that you would make us more of this unified church to the glory of your name.

Amen.