

## Sermon – 18/05/2008 am

### Alien Gentiles

Study Text: Ephesians 2:11–12

When God created this world, including man and woman, it was all very good. Man was in fellowship with God and in fellowship with the woman – until...until they sinned against God. Sin separated man from God, who is a holy God. Separated from God man also became separated from his fellow man. Man to man fellowship was broken. Sinful man no longer looked to God but to himself. His heart became full of self and full of pride. He became selfish, jealous and greedy as he focused upon the world and what it had to offer.

God spoke into this sinful world calling Abraham and making a covenant with him. Jews are descendants of Abraham in the line of Isaac and then Jacob. God formed them into a nation under the leadership of Moses and extended his covenant with them. God gave them their own land. Jesus was born a Jew, as were his disciples and Paul. People not born into this line were called Gentiles.

Paul was writing this letter to a largely Gentile church. Gentiles knew nothing of the covenant God made with the Jews. They worshipped created things or idols they had made. They knew nothing of the grace of God before Paul brought the gospel of Jesus Christ to them and they believed. Paul exhorts these Gentile believers to remember this, to remember that the gospel came from the Jews. Old ways die hard and the hatred between Jew and Gentile was deeply entrenched as we see in the life of Jonah and the apostle Peter.

In this new section of Ephesians 2 Paul addresses the issue of unity from a doctrinal basis. He goes to the root of the problem between Jew and Gentile and comes up with a powerful remedy. He is not talking about organizational unity but spiritual unity, unity in Christ. Too many leaders today according to Martin Lloyd-Jones 'are preaching about unity rather than preaching the gospel that alone can produce unity'.

Paul has reminded believers at Ephesus that they were formerly dead in their sin, and by nature children of wrath. They were saved by the grace of God through faith. They were made alive; they were made a new creation in Christ Jesus. But all believers became part of the body of Christ, the church. It is in the church that God will be glorified (3:10). In Jesus Christ not only are individuals saved from sin and death, but the church is formed as these individuals are united to Christ and through him to one another.

### Circumcision

The New Testament church was constantly threatened with division, especially between Jewish and Gentile converts. You may be asking what relevance this has for us today. We do not see Jewish converts fighting with Gentiles in the church today. We do not have Jews saying we have to be circumcised to be saved. But do we not find the same emphasis on externals in many churches today. We see division after division, not because of doctrine but because of externals or personal issues.

How and when you were baptized can determine membership of a fellowship. Which version of the Bible you read can determine your membership of a fellowship. What colour of skin

you have can still determine your membership in some countries today – as we recently heard from friends in South Africa. Your family background can determine your membership in some churches. In India caste still raises its ugly head in many churches.

Circumcision was the sign that God gave to Abraham after he made the covenant with him (Genesis 17:11). The covenant included the promise that through Abraham all peoples on earth would be blessed. The Jews seemed to forget this promise, but they did not forget the covenant sign. In fact they came to believe that being circumcised made them members of God's covenant community. They believed that through circumcision they became the chosen people of God. They did not see God's hand of grace in their being brought into the covenant – it was by physical circumcision or circumcision in the flesh by their own hands (2:11).

Jews saw the world of men as divided between the circumcised and the uncircumcised. It was black and white to them. They despised the uncircumcised (2:11). This mark in the flesh meant separation. They would not eat with Gentiles and certainly would not worship with them. Gentiles were not allowed into the temple although there were some proselytes.

*Circumcision in the flesh by hands* (2:11) stands in contrast to the truth which is that God requires circumcision of the heart. Circumcision literally means to cut off. What God required was not only for the flesh to be circumcised but the heart also with the cutting off of sin. In fact Paul elsewhere tells the Gentiles that they were circumcised with a *circumcision made without hands by putting off the body of sins of the flesh by the circumcision of Christ* (Colossians 2:11).

## **Strangers to Israel**

There is no doubt that God chose Abraham and gave him the sign of circumcision. But the Jews got it all wrong by focusing on this external mark and forgetting the covenant promise. Through Abraham God would bring blessings to all people. God revealed himself to this chosen race, and would in the fullness of time send his own son into the world through this race of people. Jesus Christ was born of a woman, born under the law (Galatians 4:4).

The Gentiles were *strangers to the covenants of promise* (2:12). All the Gentiles had was God's general revelation, his revelation in the creation. In the creation God's power and divine nature are revealed for all to see. This revelation should lead people to understand that there is a powerful creator God and a God who is good (Romans 1:20). But without God's special revelation, without God speaking, there is no knowledge of the way of salvation.

Salvation is only found in Jesus Christ. God told the Jews that he would bring salvation through the Messiah, his anointed One. That is what the prophet Isaiah clearly foretold, as did the Psalmist and other prophets. The Gentiles did not know this. They were ignorant of God's plan of salvation unless the Jews told them – which they failed to do. See the response of Jonah when told to tell Gentiles of God's judgment. See the reluctance of Peter to go to the house of the Gentile called Cornelius.

*Aliens from the commonwealth of Israel* (2:12). A commonwealth means a community of citizens or of people definitely constituted a polity. The Jews were a people belonging to God. *You only have I known of all the families of the earth* said the Lord (Amos 3:2). God knew of all nations but only Israel did he know to the extent of making a covenant with them – 'I will be your God and you shall be my people'.

To the Jews he gave the oracles of God (Romans 3:2). There was great advantage in being a Jew. To them belonged the covenants, the law and the promises. To them belong the fathers or patriarchs, as well as the prophets. But above all from them *according to the flesh Christ came, who is over all, the eternally blessed God, Amen* (Romans 9:5).

It was important for these Gentiles to remember the privileges they entered into when they believed in Christ. They did not become Jews by being circumcised. Circumcision was not important but the covenant promises were. These pointed forward to the coming of Christ. Jesus came to his own, he came to the Jews, but they rejected him. *Yet to all who received him he gave the right to become the children of God, to those who believe in his name: who were born not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man but of God* (John 1:12-13).

### **Separated from God and Christ**

The Gentiles walked in spiritual darkness. They could not see beyond the things of this world. They lived only gratify their bodily desires and to make life in this world as comfortable as possible. Without a future their hope was in their past – in the good old days. They saw nothing beyond the grave. Death daily cast its long shadow over their life. They had the urge to worship but were separated from God because of sin. They were without God. So they worshipped things God had created or else worshipped idols made according to their own imagination.

These Gentiles believers to whom Paul was writing were at one time *without hope and without God in this world* (2:12). What tragic words! They apply not only to Gentiles but to all people today who do not know the grace of God revealed in Jesus Christ. ‘Without God and without Christ’ Paul writes. It is only in Christ that these Gentiles were reconciled to God. And Christ came through the Jews as seen in the gospel genealogies.

If these words regarding the Gentiles are tragic, they are even more tragic with regard to the Jews, God’s chosen people. They rejected Jesus Christ and are therefore outside of the kingdom of God. No one, but no one, can enter the kingdom of God apart from Christ. *No one comes to the Father except by me* said Jesus (John 16:6).

Jesus is the only door for entering the kingdom of God (John 10:7). There is only one door to the kingdom of God – the door of grace in Jesus Christ. It is the door that was opened when Jesus died on the Cross. Since there is only one door to one house, all who belong to Christ are in this family of God. In Christ God has reconciled us to himself and also reconciled us to one another. This is the only way of peace as Paul goes on to say in this letter.

Do you remember being without God and without hope in this world? Do you appreciate the wonderful grace, the saving grace of God revealed in Jesus Christ? Jesus came in fulfilment of the promise God gave to Abraham and his descendants. To understand all that God has revealed to us we must read the Old Testament as well as the New Testament. The Old Testament now belongs to us. The covenant promises now belong to the Gentiles for we are no longer strangers and no longer separated from God.

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