

GOD BRINGS THE GENTILES INTO A COVENANT RELATIONSHIP WITH HIM

Ephesians 2: 11-22

Before the incarnation of Christ and the making of a new universal covenant with God through Christ's blood, those who were not Jews – which probably includes most of us who are here this morning – had no standing to approach God. Long ago God had selected one man – Abraham – and made a covenant with him and his descendants; as Genesis chapter 15 tells us, whereby the descendants of Abraham would be established in the land of Israel and would enjoy a special relationship with God. This covenant was unilateral, that is, it was a promise made by God, which did not require Abraham to do anything to benefit from it. To make this absolutely clear, God put Abraham to sleep whilst this covenant was made, as we see in Genesis 15:12. God made this covenant before circumcision was even mentioned, so circumcision was a sign of the covenant not a condition of it .

But, this unilateral covenant with Abraham, was supplemented by a bilateral conditional covenant with the descendants of Abraham, when God made a new and further covenant with the descendants of Abraham, as we learn from Exodus 19:3-8. This further covenant was a conditional covenant (unlike the covenant made with Abraham and his descendents) which required the Israelites to obey the laws which God had given them at Mount Sinai – and which the Israelites had agreed to obey (Exodus 19:8).

But the Israelites totally failed to live up to their promises. They rebelled against God time and time again and eventually God lost patience with them and sent the Israelites into exile. Listen to what the prophet Jeremiah says:

“This is the word that came to Jeremiah from the LORD: "Listen to the terms of this covenant and tell them to the people of Judah and to those who live in Jerusalem. Tell them that this is what the LORD, the God of Israel, says: ‘Cursed is the man who does not obey the terms of this covenant— the terms I commanded your forefathers when I

brought them out of Egypt, out of the iron-smelting furnace.’ I said, ‘Obey me and do everything I command you, and you will be my people, and I will be your God. Then I will fulfil the oath I swore to your forefathers, to give them a land flowing with milk and honey’—the land you possess today.” I answered, "Amen, LORD." The LORD said to me, "Proclaim all these words in the towns of Judah and in the streets of Jerusalem: ‘Listen to the terms of this covenant and follow them. From the time I brought your forefathers up from Egypt until today, I warned them again and again, saying, "Obey me." But they did not listen or pay attention; instead, they followed the stubbornness of their evil hearts. So I brought on them all the curses of the covenant I had commanded them to follow but that they did not keep.’””
(Jeremiah 11:1-8 NIV)

But this unhappy story was not yet over. God had a further plan to bring salvation to both the Israelites and the Gentiles, indeed all mankind. To accomplish this, God made a new unilateral covenant, not just with the Jewish people, but with the whole of humankind: “After taking the cup, [Jesus] gave thanks and said, "Take this and divide it among you. For I tell you I will not drink again of the fruit of the vine until the kingdom of God comes." And he took bread, gave thanks and broke it, and gave it to them, saying, "This is my body given for you; do this in remembrance of me." In the same way, after the supper he took the cup, saying, "This cup is the new covenant in my blood, which is poured out for you.” (Luke 22:17-20 NIV). We still remember and celebrate the making of this covenant when we take communion.

Christ was crucified and bore in his body all the sins that have been and will be committed by mankind. He who was sinless was made sin for us. He paid the penalty for our sins – which was death – in order that we would not be condemned for our sins, but rather be justified before God and reconciled to Him.

In our reading today the apostle Paul tells us that Gentiles were excluded from the old Mosaic covenant, but are included in this new covenant in Christ’s blood. Look at verses 11-12:

“Therefore, remember that formerly you who are Gentiles by birth and called "uncircumcised" by those who call themselves "the circumcision" (that done in the body by the hands of men)—remember that at that time you were separate from Christ, excluded from citizenship in Israel and foreigners to the covenants of the promise, without hope and without God in the world.” (Ephesians 2:11-12 NIV)

Here Paul is telling us that the privileges now enjoyed by Gentile believers in Christ would be appreciated all the more gratefully if they bore in mind the state of life from which they had been delivered. The pious Jew was ever conscious of the privileges which he had inherited: daily he thanked God that he had not been made a Gentile, because God had revealed himself to the Jews in a unique way.

Listen to what Psalm 147 says:

“He has done this for no other nation; they do not know his laws. Praise the LORD.” (Psalm 147:20 NIV)

The external sign of the Jews’ special relationship with God was circumcision, the seal of the covenant which God had made with their ancestor Abraham (see Genesis 17:9–14). For the Jews the ‘uncircumcission’ of the Gentiles was a sign of their estrangement from God, but Paul had now learned that physical circumcision in the flesh was irrelevant; indeed he dismissed it as ‘a mutilation’ (Philippians 3:2). What was relevant was a circumcision (or cleansing) of the heart.

Nevertheless, the Jews did possess significant religious privileges. They had been entrusted with the scriptures and given the Law. To them belonged the Patriarchs and Christ had been born to a Jewish mother. But, salvation no longer came from circumcision and the Law, but from Christ’s sacrificial death and resurrection. Look at verses 13-18 of our reading:

“But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far away have been brought near through the blood of Christ. For he himself is our peace, who has made the two one and has destroyed the barrier, the dividing wall of hostility, by abolishing in his flesh the law with its

commandments and regulations. His purpose was to create in himself one new man out of the two, thus making peace, and in this one body to reconcile both of them to God through the cross, by which he put to death their hostility. He came and preached peace to you who were far away and peace to those who were near. For through him we both have access to the Father by one Spirit.” (Ephesians 2:13-18 NIV)

The new situation “in Christ Jesus” has changed everything. Gentiles, who were previously “far away” have now been “brought near” through Christ’s blood because the new covenant in Christ’s blood is universal. It’s for all mankind, for anyone and everyone who turns to Christ in faith acknowledging him as their Lord and Master. As these verses tell us ‘Christ is our peace’, through him we are reconciled to one another, especially Jews and Gentiles are reconciled to one another. Circumcision is now irrelevant, as are ritual cleanliness and dietary laws.

However, it is not the law as a revelation of the character and will of God that has been done away with in Christ. In that sense of the term the question and answer of Romans 3:31 remain valid:

“Do we then overthrow the law by this faith? By no means! On the contrary, we uphold the law.”

The righteousness required by the law of God is realized more fully by the inward enabling of the Spirit – in Jew and Gentile alike – than was possible under the old covenant. But the law as a written code, threatening death instead of imparting life, is done away with in Christ, as Paul explains in 2 Corinthians 3:6–15. When the law in that sense is done away with, the barrier between Jews and Gentiles is removed; Jewish particularism and Gentile exclusion are things of the past.

Jews and Gentiles are reconciled to each other because they are both reconciled to God through the cross of Christ. In Christ they have both become members of the same family and when both address him as Abba, Father they attest that they are both indwelt by one and the same spirit.

Let's move on and look at verses 19 - 22 of our reading:

“Consequently, you are no longer foreigners and aliens, but fellow-citizens with God’s people and members of God’s household, built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the chief cornerstone. In him the whole building is joined together and rises to become a holy temple in the Lord. And in him you too are being built together to become a dwelling in which God lives by his Spirit.” (Ephesians 2:19-22 NIV)

The first Gentile believers who were admitted to a church comprising Jewish Christians could well have felt ill at ease. It was desirable that they should be made to feel completely at home. The church had a Jewish base; its members had Jewish presuppositions, and it would have been too easy for Gentile Christians to do or say something which was felt to be out of place. What indeed was their status in such a community? Were they there on sufferance, as visitors, like the God-fearing Gentiles who attended synagogue in cities of the dispersion? Was their position like that of resident aliens in a Greek city? In a crisis like that which arose in Antioch when Peter and others abandoned the practice of table-fellowship with Gentile Christians, the latter must have got the impression that they were at best second-rate citizens. Against this apparent demotion of Gentile Christians Paul protested vigorously at Antioch (Galatians 2:11-14), and it is Paul’s attitude that finds uncompromising expression here. Gentile Christians are not adherents or visitors or second-rate citizens in the believing community; they are full members.

If the church community is viewed as a building then Gentile believers are integral parts of the structure. Yet the key to the structure is Christ, who, as the cornerstone joins it solidly together. He joins the whole building together. Under Christ’s direction the whole building grows together to form a sanctuary.

If the apostles and prophets were the foundation members of this living sanctuary and other Jewish believers were among the earliest “stones” built into its fabric, the situation now was that Gentile believers (“like ourselves”) were being added to the structure as new

stones, in constantly increasing numbers. All Christians are stones in the fabric of the church. The new community, God's fellowship of reconciliation, transcends all distinctions of race, status, and sex. Properly oriented to the one cornerstone, based on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Gentile Christians, along with their fellow-believers of Jewish birth, belonged equally to God's holy house. As the God of Israel had once taken up residence in the wilderness tabernacle and later in the Jerusalem temple by his name and his glory, so now by his Spirit he makes the fellowship of believers, Jewish and Gentile alike, his chosen dwelling-place. No privilege is bestowed on the people of God in which Gentiles do not enjoy an equal share.

So what does this lesson from scripture mean for us here today, when conflict between Jews and Gentiles is no longer a major issue in the church. Well it's perfectly clear that we must respect and fully accept all Christian believers – male and female, rich and poor, black and white – people of all kinds from all races – into our church community. We must befriend them and make them all equal parts of our church and build them into the structure of God's kingdom here in this place just as Paul urged the bringing in of Jews and Gentiles together in the first century AD. As we saw in our reading, and in Him you too are being built together to become a dwelling in which God lives by His spirit.