

## God's Grace in the Life of the Church By Murray Capill

Well, if you can turn again to Ephesians 2, and we're considering verses 11 to 22.

It's a sad reality that religion and faith have often been right at the heart of some of the deepest divisions and rifts between people.

In fact, that's sometimes an excuse that non-Christians use for taking no interest in the faith.

They say, well, look, wherever you have religion, wherever you have people of belief, you have division and rift, and there's something to it.

You think of the terrible division between Jew and Arab in the Middle East.

You think of the heightening conflict between Muslims and a so-called Christianized West.

You think of the dreadful divisions between Irish Catholics and Protestants that have only recently been laid to rest.

You think of the religious wars of the 16th century in Europe or the Crusades when Christendom, so-called, invaded Jerusalem held by the Muslims.

In reaction to this great string of tensions and rifts between people of different faiths, we've seen the rise of the ecumenical and the interfaith movement that seeks to bring people of diverse faiths together, seeks to teach acceptance and tolerance and a oneness despite a multiplicity of beliefs.

The interfaith movement believes that there's some kind of common ground, that there are many roads up this mountain to God and we'll meet each other en route somewhere.

Well, in view both of the reality of conflict and of the claims of the interfaith movement, I think these verses are tremendously important and tremendously helpful for us to look at.

They speak of another rift that was as deep or perhaps deeper than any of the other ones I've mentioned, the deep division between Jew and Gentile.

And these verses open up God's way of reconciliation.

They open up the way in which he has brought the most profound reconciliation where there was the deepest division.

And his way of reconciliation has the church right at the centre of it.

And so as we look at this, we're going to be looking at truths about the church and truths that concern how there can be profound unity and reconciliation between people who would otherwise be divided.

Now, the passage follows on from what we looked at in verses 1 to 10 where Paul speaks of individual salvation.

He speaks of that salvation template, the three phases that any believer will be able to see in some shape or form in their own life.

But when God has worked in someone with his sovereign grace, and it is by grace you've been saved through faith, not of works and no one can boast, but when God has done that, he never leaves that person just as an island, just as one isolated individual Christian who's encountered the grace of God.

He always brings the people he's saved into the church, into his body, into his family.

God's great plan of redemption is not just a plan for a lot of individuals.

It's a plan for a community of people.

So look with me at some of the teaching here about the great community that God is forming.

The first thing that's very clear in these verses is that the church, the body of Christ, is an international community, an international community.

Paul writes these verses as a Jew, but he writes them to those who for the most part are Gentiles.

And the word Gentile in Greek simply means the nations.

It's the word ethnos from which we get ethnic.

And so in the mindset of the Bible, there are the Jews and the nations.

There's Israel and the rest.

That's the basic fundamental division of all humanity, Jews and the rest.

And that's how it had been for a very long time because if you go back to the beginning of the biblical story, God saw the wickedness and the depravity and the pride of sinful mankind.

And out of out of mankind, he chose one man and he said, I'm going to build you into my nation.

I'm going to make you into a great nation.

He takes that one guy, Abraham, and he promises him descendants and he promises him land and he promises him blessing.

God isolates one person from whom he'll make one nation and it is going to be one nation and the rest.

But part of God's plan was not only that Abraham's descendants would be a distinct people, but through their distinctness, they would mediate blessing to the rest.

One nation set apart for God, but that nation to be a kingdom of priests, a kingdom of people who would mediate God's blessings to the ends of the earth.

Now, the Jews, for the most part, got the first part of the deal and not the second.

They got the idea that they were different.

They got the idea that they were set apart and distinct.

They didn't get the idea that they were set apart so as to be a blessing to the ends of the earth.

There were many things in the law and in the additional Jewish customs and traditions that entrenched their difference, their set apartness, their distinctness.

One of the biggies was circumcision.

And that's where this passage begins.

Remember that formerly you who are Gentiles by birth and called uncircumcised by those who call themselves the circumcision.

That was one of the biggest distinctions of all.

The Jews had in their flesh a mark of having been set apart for God and belonging to him and the Gentiles didn't.

And then the Jews had the various food laws.

They had all sorts of laws about what was clean and what was unclean, what they could eat and what they couldn't eat.

And so the Jews were only eating what was kosher.

And the Gentiles, the nations, the rest were forever eating unclean things.

They're eating pigs and oysters and all sorts of other stuff, which rendered them ceremonially unclean.

And so a Jew wouldn't have any contact with them because if he had contact with someone who was unclean, he would become unclean.

So it entrenched a separation between the Jews and the rest.

And then the Jews, of course, had the very great promises of God.

To them were made the covenant promises.

They were the covenant people and the rest were outside the covenant.

In fact, even right at the temple, the Jews could go closest to the holy place.

But there was literally a wall of division.

There was literally a barrier between that court and the outer court, the court of the Gentiles.

They couldn't go any closer.

There was a wall that kept them out.

So the Gentiles, the nations, the rest weren't just foreigners nationally.

They were foreigners spiritually, unclean, cut off, held at a distance, excluded from the privileges of Israel.

And that's what Paul is saying there.

Verse 12, remember that at that time you were separate from Christ, excluded from citizenship in Israel, foreigners to the covenants of promise without hope and without God.

Now Israel, as I said, was meant to be a light to the nations.

Israel were meant to mediate God's blessings to the nations and call them to the Lord and shine light into the darkness around them.

But they didn't for the most part.

They dreaded the thought.

You remember Jonah?

Jonah commissioned to go and preach to some Gentiles, some pagans, some heathen people.

And why doesn't Jonah want to go there?

It's not because he fears his preaching won't be effective.

It's because he fears his preaching will be effective.

He says, Lord, I know what you're like.

I'll go there.

I'll preach judgment and blow me down.

I bet they repent and your jolly will have mercy on them.

And that was the last thing in the world that he wanted.

He didn't want to see mercy for their enemies.

He wanted to see them wiped out.

So he flees in the opposite direction until God grabs him by the scruff of the neck and plants him back there and blow me down.

Exactly what Jonah feared happens.

They repent and God has mercy.

You know, just horrible stuff for a Jew.

They had it all wrong.

They despise Gentiles.

They hated them.

They called them dogs.

And when they called them dogs, they weren't thinking of poodles, you know.

Well, I don't think I could call a poodle cute.

I mean, they're weird.

But he's not thinking of some little puppy, some little lap dog.

When the Jews called Gentiles dogs, they despised them.

They loathed them.

Now, what a different way Paul writes here.

A Jew writing to Gentiles.

He now writes of the two being made one.

He says the dividing wall has been broken down.

He says those who were far off have been brought near.

He says the hostility has been removed.

One new body, one new man formed out of the two.

Gentiles, no longer foreigners, no longer aliens, no longer excluded.

Now, to any Jew at the time, this was absolutely radical,  
almost unthinkable.

And to any Gentile, it was almost unthinkable, forever held at a distance and not welcomed.

But Paul is proclaiming that in Christ, there's now one body, an international community, a multicultural community,  
that embraces all nations.

And there are no divisions, no divisions between black and white, Jew and Gentile, Asian-American, African, white  
Australian,

Aboriginal, no divisions whatsoever.

The wall's been broken down.

How? How has the dividing wall been broken down?

The answer is solely through the glorious work of Jesus Christ.

And there are two things in particular that Christ has done to make the two one.

First of all, verse 15, He's abolished the laws that caused separation.

By abolishing in His flesh, the dividing wall of hostility, has been broken down by abolishing in His flesh the law

with its commandments and regulations.

Now, when it says that, it's not talking about the moral law.

You remember that Jesus said on the Sermon on the Mount, I've not come to abolish the law but to fulfill it.

He says, not the least jot or tittle will be removed from the law.

And He goes on to expound the moral law.

The moral law stands.

But there were another whole set of laws, ceremonies, rituals, regulations that were put in place to point to the ultimate cleansing work of Jesus Christ, the food laws, the laws commanding cleanness and uncleanness, ceremonial rituals and washings, sacrifices and offerings, those laws put in place to point to Christ.

And when Christ dies on the cross, He fulfills those laws.

He fulfills all that they pointed to.

And now, with His blood shed once for all to cleanse all who come to Him, those laws drop away.

And so the laws which create separation drop away.

And the two can now become one.

Everyone in Christ is clean.

And every food in Christ is clean.

And so we can come to Christ, and we can eat roast pork.

These are wonderful gospel blessings.

All is clean because of the finished work of Christ.

He's abolished the laws that cause separation.

And secondly, through that work, He's reconciled both Jew and Gentile to God.

Reconciled both Jew and Gentile to God.

Verse 16, or leading in from second half of verse 15, 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.

We need to understand that deeper than the division between Jew and Gentile was the division between both Jew and Gentile and God.

The deepest rift, the deepest division that exists, is that between sinful people and a holy God.

Sin separates all of us from God.

Jew and Gentile, it's no respecter of persons, nationality, intelligence, or anything else.

Sin levels us all and renders us cut off from God under His wrath, alienated from Him.

And actually, that need, the need of our sinful hearts to be cleansed, the need of God somehow to have mercy on us, that need unites all of us deeply.

We have something in common.

I don't care where you come from or what you look like or who you are.

We have something in common.

Jew and Gentile have in common their desperate need of reconciliation with God.

You know how it is that when you're traveling, if you meet an Australian overseas, it can be kind of exciting.

You hear from a distance this funny accent.

And you hear them talking about things from home.

And think, goodness me, it's an Australian.

And you might go up to this person.

You say, are you from Aussie?

You introduce yourself.

You talk.

You strike up a bit of a conversation with them.

It's bizarre because you'd never do it here.

You live with 20 million of them back home.

That same person, if you bumped them down in the main street of town, you'd never talk to them.

But when you're far away, you have this common bond.

And the common bond is you're both far away.

And so it is really for all of us here and people of every tribe and nation and tongue, the one thing we've all got in common is we've been far away from God.

And we're united in our desperate need of God to do something about it because we can't.

And Christ came to do it.

Christ came to shed His blood for the sins of many.

He came to pay the price for the sins of Jew and Gentile alike.

He came to bring us all near to God.

And so it says here, He came to preach peace, verse 17, to you who are far away and peace to those who were near.

Peace with God through His atoning sacrifice.

We're brought near to God through the cross.

And at the foot of the cross, we meet each other.

And we meet Jew and Gentile, Kiwi and Aussie, Asian,

African, American.

We meet other needy sinners who found life and peace through Jesus alone.

The church is not a multi-faith community.

Anything but.

But it is a multicultural community with one faith, faith in the Lord Jesus Christ.

So that's the first great theme that Paul opens up in these verses.

The church is this international community because of Christ.

Now we can go just a little further in verse 19 and say that that international community is a united family.

The church is a united family.

It's really family language that Paul uses in verse 19.

Consequently, you're no longer foreigners and aliens, but fellow citizens with God's people and members of God's household.

Members of a household, a family, they live together.

And that's now the situation for Jew and Gentile and everyone else who's been united through Christ.

We share equal blessings and equal privileges and equal experiences of God's grace.

There are no divisions.

There are no ranks.

We're all in the same family together.

Now that's quite unique because it seems to me that wherever you go in society, people are put into categories.

You go to a school, and they're all in their little classes, age-segregated.

And in some schools, there'll be classes for the bright ones and classes for the thick ones.

And you know it if you're not in one of the bright ones.

I was never in one of the bright ones.

It's true.

Well, you believe that, I'm sure.

You go on an airplane.

You go overseas.

You are constantly put into different categories.

You're bored with different passports, identifying your nationality.

You sit in different parts of the plane depending on how much you've paid for your ticket.

You get different levels of service depending on where you sit in the plane.

You get off the other end, and you go into different queues for customs.

And if you go to the United States, you know what queue you stand in as a New Zealander or Australian or someone from some country other than the States.

It's not called visitors.

It's not called overseas enquirers.

It's not called foreigners even.

It's called aliens.

Isn't that delightful?

That really makes you feel welcome.

But you come to church.

You come into a part of the body of Christ.

And there should be no division, no ranks, no better seats and worse seats, no segregation, age, sex, ability, social standing.

We're all one before God.

We've all stood with exactly the same need, the desperate need of God to have mercy on us.

And he's had mercy on us.

And when united, all division has been broken down.

And so friends, what I want to say to you is this.

If Christ has broken down every barrier and dealt with us all equally and drawn us all to God, don't go erecting barriers now where God's broken them down.

Don't go putting walls of division back up.

Don't make the church a closed shop where Christ has opened it for all.

Don't become narrow in whom your church deals with when Christ is so broad.

Now, what does that mean in practice?

The division between Jew and Gentile is maybe not the big issue here and in your churches.

I suspect it's not.

Circumcision and uncircumcision is probably not the big issue.

I hope it's not the big issue.

But let me suggest five ways, just very quickly, five ways in which you can make sure that you don't go erecting barriers where Christ has broken them down.

These are just very simple and very practical.

But I think we need to think about this sort of thing.

First of all, welcome all people warmly.

Welcome all people warmly.

Go out of your way to do that.

Don't take the risk of anyone feeling overlooked.

Don't take the risk of anyone feeling second rate and that you just look straight past them.

I mean, even if it's just looking at them and smiling, if it's just acknowledging them, just warmly welcoming each other week by week in your own church community, not just visitors, but just each other.

Warmly welcome and greet and love each other.

And go out of your comfort zone to do that.

I mean, look how far Christ went to break down the wall of division.

Surely you can get out of your seat, the seat you've sat in for the last 20 years, and go and sit by someone who's a visitor to the church.



Surely you can forsake talking to your little friend, your family member, for a couple of minutes while you go and speak to someone else who's standing alone.

Show, bend over backwards to show that there are no little clicks in your church, no little closed family clubs or anything like that.

Welcome all people warmly.

Secondly, mix with people who aren't like you.

Mix with people who aren't like you.

Now, I know that people like you are just the nicest people around.

Not everyone is as good as looking as you are, as intelligent, as sophisticated, not all such good conversationalists, but you need, for the sake of Christ and the unity of his body, to mix with people who aren't like you.

And if you're really brainy, you need to spend time with people who aren't, because they'll just pull you down to earth.

And if your life is all very neat and tidy, you need to spend time with people whose lives aren't neat and tidy, because it will shake up your categories.

And if you're very white, you need to spend time with some people who aren't very white.

And if you're very young, you need to spend time with people who are very old, because we're a united family.

I mean, when we serve up dinner at home, we don't have the kids sitting, followed by the teens sitting, followed by the oldies sitting, where Wendy and I sit down together.

We're together.

We're one.

We're family.

Go out of your way to mix with people who are different from you.

Thirdly, build bridges wherever you sense there is a gap.

Build bridges wherever you sense there's a gap.

You know how it is sometimes you just sense there's something not quite right there.

I just feel there's a bit of distance that's crept in.

You maybe don't even know why, but you just feel that this relationship is not quite as it ought to be.

Well, don't brood on that.

And don't just leave it alone and let that little gap get deeper and deeper and deeper.

Go and speak to the person.

Bridge it.

Reach out to them.

And that relates to the fourth one.

Speak well of your brothers and sisters.

Don't go home from church and analyze everyone to death and point out all their oddities and idiosyncrasies.

Learn to look for the good in others.

Learn to see God's grace in other people's lives.

Learn to be thankful for who God's made them and the gifts he's given them.

Learn to appreciate every member of the family that God has put together in Christ.

Speak well of each other and speak up for your brother and your sister when they're spoken against.

And finally, cherish the diversity of the church.

Cherish the diversity of the church.

Different backgrounds, different cultures,

different personalities, different financial situations, different ages.

The church is not meant to be as homogeneous as possible.

It's meant to be as diverse as possible.

It's meant to be as reflective as it can possibly be of this wonderful work that Jesus has done in uniting Jew and Gentile male and female slave and free.

And in Colossians 3 something or other, Colossians 3, 11 and Galatians 3, 28, Paul speaks of how the barrier's gone not just of Jew and Gentile, but slave and free, male and female.

Every barrier is broken down and the church should be the most diverse community possible.

And these things that I'm talking about, the world needs to see.

The world needs to see it.

They need to see the gospel in action.

Let me read, if I may, just a paragraph from John Stott as he comments on this passage in his commentary.

He says, I wonder if anything is more urgent today for the honor of Christ and for the spread of the gospel than that the church should be and should be seen to be what by God's purpose and Christ's achievement it already is.

A single new humanity, a model of human community, a family of reconciled brothers and sisters who love their father and love each other.

The evident dwelling place of God by his spirit.

Only then will the world believe in Christ as peacemaker.

Only then will God receive the glory due to his name.

What a challenge that is for every little church community represented here.

Make sure in your community you relate together as a model of what Christ alone has achieved.

And so I go to the third thing that I want to speak about in this passage.

The church is this international community, a united family.

And finally, we see here it's a growing building.

Paul changes the imagery again in verse 20 and following.

He's talked about God's household.

Now he talks about the house.

A building, a building with foundations.

And you know how important it is when a building is put up to get the foundations right.

And Paul says here, this new community is built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets.

And I think that means the foundation of their teaching.

That which was revealed through them and spoken by them.

The apostles teaching was the foundation on which this house, this community was to be built.

As they laid that foundation, they put in place the chief cornerstone.

Now the cornerstone in building practice at that time was a large slab of stone that was placed in the corner in the foundation.

And it set the angles for the rest of the building.

It was hugely important that that stone was square and that it was well laid.

In excavations from the old temple in Jerusalem, they have found some cornerstones 12 meters in length.

So these were pretty humongous stones.

And this passage says, the cornerstone of the church is Jesus Christ.

He's the big block that sets everything at right angles and makes everything square.

The church is built on him.

His life, his death, his love, his grace, his truth, his righteousness, his majesty, his authority, his kingly lordship.

Jesus Christ is central to the building of the church.

And so building on him is the only hope for true unity between people.

I hold out absolutely no hope whatsoever for the interfaith movement.

It won't achieve anything because it's not building on one foundation with one cornerstone, Christ Jesus.

It's trying to build on human goodwill.

Just accept each other, embrace each other, forget what you believe, just love each other.

The Bible never says that.

We love each other in the truth, and the truth is in Christ.

We build on apostolic truth with Christ at the center.

And as we do that, the church is still being built up.

It's a growing building, it says here.

More and more stones are being put in.

And as you share the gospel with friends and as you witness in their community, more stones are placed in the building.

It's rising and growing.

And rising, it says here, verse 21, to become a holy temple to the Lord.

For the Old Testament Jew, the temple was the most holy place on earth.

Now in Christ, his community, his people are that holy dwelling place of God.

Look at verse 22.

In him, you two are being built together to become a dwelling in which God lives by his spirit.

Buildings don't matter anymore.

Cathedrals and magnificent church architecture, it doesn't count for anything.

What counts are the people who meet in buildings and houses and out in fields or in shacks or wherever they are, the people who've been built into the house of the Lord, living stones in the holy temple of God.

That's why the church is so important.

That's why church is not optional.

It's the community of God's people.

It's the place where God dwells.

So we've got some high ideals for the church in these verses, haven't we?

A truly international community, a truly united family, and a truly holy building, the temple of the living God.

In a world of division and conflict and rifts between people, go into bat for God's model of reconciliation, the gospel, the church.

And don't think of that as too simplistic.

Wherever we meet division and conflict and tension, the most profound answer is that warring parties and divided spouses and all the rest be humbled at the foot of the cross and find in Jesus Christ a unity because of His grace and His mercy and nothing else and reason in Him to embrace each other, even if everything else would keep them apart.

And one day, Jesus is coming again.

And when we gather above, there won't be separate rooms and different funny corridors that you have to go down to find the kiwis down one end.

And we'll be gathered as a people from every tribe and nation and language and people, one universal family of God, praising the glorious grace of God in Christ.

I hope to see you there.

Shall we pray?

Yes.

Father, we thank you for the truths of this passage.

And we don't want to just grasp them intellectually as great truths about how you have united the church in Christ.

But Father, we pray that we might learn to live these truths out in the churches that we come from.

So challenge us about the way that we think about other people and the way we treat other people, the way we embrace them.

Challenge us to think about the dynamics of our church communities.

And so humble us before your throne of grace.

And so thrill us with the gospel that we'll do whatever we can to show the love and grace and mercy of Christ to others.

And we'll do whatever we can to keep building up the church, your holy temple.

Father, we can't do that alone.

Work your grace in our hearts to make us a gracious people.