

Building Biblical
COMMUNITY *in* CHRIST

God's United Nations
Ephesians 2:19-22

19 Consequently, you are no longer foreigners and aliens, but fellow citizens with God's people and members of God's household, 20 built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the chief cornerstone. 21 In him the whole building is joined together and rises to become a holy temple in the Lord. 22 And in him you too are being built together to become a dwelling in which God lives by his Spirit. Ephesians 2:19-22

Introduction

At one point in Jesus' ministry he looked at his disciple, Peter, who had just confessed that Jesus was the Christ, the Son of God, and said: *"And I tell you that you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not overcome it"* (Matthew 16:18).

We might call that the conception of the church. Just as a child is conceived in his mother's womb, so we find here the first mention of the church in the Gospels along with the promise of its birth and construction. And yet, rather paradoxically, the victorious tone of Jesus' words stand in stark contrast to the events following Peter's confession. The lead shepherd of that newly conceived church was to be executed as a criminal. The one we might call the chairman of the board, Peter, was discovered cursing and denying he ever knew the Messiah. The chief treasurer, Judas, committed suicide. All the other board members ran off. And about all that was left were a few women from ladies auxiliary!

Amazingly, though, after a period of gestation, the church *was* born as recorded in Acts 2. And that fledgling group of disciples, along with all who believed on that never-to-be-forgotten day in Jerusalem, were transformed into a powerful, courageous, multi-national entity called the church. But just as a baby is conceived, born and then named, so the church is given many names in the New Testament that describe what we are called to be. Pastor

Reilly mentioned several of these names last week. And today, in Ephesians 2:19-22, we find three names, or images, that graphically depict our new identity as the people of God.

God's New Society (19a)

The first image we find is found in the beginning of verse 19:

Consequently, you are no longer foreigners and aliens, but fellow citizens with God's people...

Have you ever noticed how just about every nationality tends to view the world in terms of “them” and “us?” Once the Greek empire came into supremacy, we find the same phenomenon. The Greeks were the “civilized” fold, and everyone else were barbarians, a description that comes from the word *barbar*, meaning to stammer or stutter like a child. [So if you weren't a Greek, you could only *bar bar bar bar bar* when you tried to talk!] And then when the Romans gained supremacy, everybody else was considered barbarians. I also understand that China comes from a word in their language meaning “middle.” China is the “middle Kingdom” and everyone else is merely on the outskirts. Last night I saw the recently released film *Hotel Rwanda* depicting that unbelievable genocide of the 90's. The Hutous considered the Tutsies an inferior people, calling them cockroaches and in need of extermination.

From the standpoint of the Old Testament there were the Jews, and then there was everyone else, called the Gentiles (or more literally, the *nations*). Not that the Gentiles were socially or racially inferior (at least not from God's perspective), but *spiritually* they (and we) were disadvantaged.

And that is precisely what Paul says here as he describes our spiritual state as Gentiles. He says in verse 19 that we were “foreigners” and “aliens.” The first description – “foreigners” – carries the idea of being a *stranger*. Have you ever felt like that, a stranger? A stranger is one who feels rather strange among those around him. I experienced this recently while I was in South Korea. I didn't know the people, I didn't know the language, I didn't know the customs. I struggle when I eat with chopsticks. Everytime I tried to get some Kimchee with those sticks, it would fall back onto the plate. I would politely smile and try again. I was always amazed at the versatility that

Jonathan demonstrated as he learned the language and the customs of that culture.

But you know, I was a total stranger. One night we were supposed to meet some other “strangers” to that culture – a missionary family that had not yet learned the language. But since they lived on one side of Seoul – a city of over 15 million people – and we were staying on the other side of the city, we decided that we would rendez-vous at a certain location that was more or less familiar to both of us. We arrived there, but our friends were no where to be found. I tried to call them on their cell phone. One Korean business man on the street, seeing that I was lost or looking for someone, let me use his cell phone to call our friends. When I finished using his phone, he politely gave me two lollypops and said “Enjoy Seoul!” Having spoken with our friends by phone, we each described where we thought we were, giving several landmarks, but were simply weren’t connecting. Do you know how long it took us to connect? Fifty minutes. Do you know how far apart we were the whole time? Fifty yards. That’s what happens when you’re a *stranger*.

But Paul also talks here about being a *foreigner*. In contrast to a stranger, a foreigner can be very familiar with the country in which he finds himself, but he is still limited. He can’t hold a job there; he doesn’t carry the national passport. I felt this way in France at times. I knew the language, the culture, the people, and had traveled to most parts of the country...but I was still a foreigner. I was still living on a passport or a resident card.

Paul describes this situation in verses 11-12 of this chapter that we looked at last week. Listen carefully as Doug reads these verses from the NLT:

Don't forget that you Gentiles used to be outsiders by birth. You were called "the uncircumcised ones" by the Jews, who were proud of their circumcision, even though it affected only their bodies and not their hearts. In those days you were living apart from Christ. You were excluded from God's people, Israel, and you did not know the promises God had made to them. You lived in this world without God and without hope. Ephesians 2:11-12 NLT

To be foreigners and aliens implies instability and insecurity, whereas being part of God’s new society speaks of stability and security. “We no longer live on a passport, but...we really have our birth certificates,... we really do

belong.”ⁱ And it is not that we have somehow been superficially incorporated into Israel, God’s people of the OT, but we are part of what one contemporary of the early Christians called “the third race.” But here Paul envisions something far greater and more spectacular. This new society is neither Jewish nor Roman nor Greek, but interracial and international in character.ⁱⁱ This society has no geographical boundaries. Within this new society there is no discrimination between those of different color, gender, race or ability. Within this new society there is no oppressive rule, for Jews and Gentiles (i.e. the nations) are on equal footing in this new society.

Since we are a “new society,” does this mean that all cultural and gender distinctions within the church are abolished? The same Paul that says that “in Christ there is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free...” is also involved in that most important Jerusalem council recorded in Acts 15 where the unique cultural distinctives of Jews and Gentiles are acknowledged and allowed to flourish side by side. Why? Because the unity of those in this “new society” is not uniformity, but something much more profound. It is a unity of the Spirit that is experienced to the degree that the members of this new society submit themselves to the rule of Christ, the head of the church, in their lives.

Or maybe on a more personal level, you’re feeling like a “stranger” and a “foreigner” among God’s people?

God’s New Family (19b)

Not only are we described here as a *new society*, but also as a *new family*. Notice what Paul says here in the later part of verse 19...

*Consequently, you are no longer foreigners and aliens, but ...
members of God's household...*

One of the greatest joys of my life as a father was seeing and participating in the birth of each one of my four children. Each one, newly born, gradually became aware of affectionate faces dotting and drooling over their crib. As the days passed, our children probably recognized first their mother, then me, their proud and elated dad, and finally their brothers and sisters. As they continued to grow, they added to that fundamental sphere of relationship other circles of relatives, family friends and neighbors. My children, as well

as yours, and all of us grow up in a world of relationships. In recent years, social scientists have tried to clarify what constitutes happiness and fulfillment. Their studies tend to prove that these much sought after ideals are best found in the context of healthy family relationships. Healthy social environments are just as important for the development of individuals as hereditary disposition.

As in the biological family, so in the family of God. Those of us who have experienced the new birth have been born into a circle of relationship, both vertical and horizontal. We are children of God, we are sons of God, we are brothers and sisters, and as such we make up the household of God, i.e. the family of God.

It is amazing the number of references to the family as an image of the people of God. This is certainly because God speaks to us in language that we can understand and He knows that we can understand the language of the family. Paradoxically, however, we never find the people of God specifically called the “family of God” either in the OT or in the NT. But the Scriptures do use several family terms that leave us in no doubt...we are the family of God!!

One of those terms is used right here, translated in the NIV “household.” The New Living New Testaments translates it “family.” The word in Paul’s language originally meant “house,” but since there is no specific word for the family unit, it came to mean not only the house itself, but also the household, i.e. those bound together relationally and sharing the same dwelling place.ⁱⁱⁱ

In fact, in this one passage, five other terms are used, all of which come from the word here translated “household” or “family.” In verse 19 “stranger” (*paroikos*) literally is “those who are against the household.” In verse 20 “built upon” (*epoikodomeo*) comes from the same word. And so does the term “building” or “structure” (*oikodome*) in verse 21. And so does “built together” (*synoikodomeo*) and “dwelling place” (*katoiketerion*) in verse 22.

The house in early Christianity was extremely important, not only as a place of *meeting* but also as a place of *meating*, i.e. fellowship and relationship often around a meal.^{iv} It is in the household, the family that the realities of life are lived out. It’s relatively easy to come to a gathering like this on

Sunday and for an hour-and-a-half convince yourself and others that you are doing pretty well. But it is quite another thing in the household, under your own roof. I know my family sees me when I'm down, when I get frustrated, when I lose my temper. They see the real me. No wonder Paul, when he speaks of someone being an elder in the church, says that this person must rule his house well, for otherwise, how can he take care of the larger family of God (1 Tim 3.4,5,12).

The fact of the matter is, early Christianity knew nothing of a weekly gathering with several hundred people in attendance. The life of the early church was lived out in house churches. Oh, they may have gathered together from time to time in a larger setting. But the majority of their gatherings were held in the homes of those Christians who practiced the gift of hospitality. And though there is nothing wrong with meeting as a large group like here at CB (in fact, there are many advantages), there is a certain downside when it comes to entering deeply into one another's lives. And that is why we have Life Groups here at CB.

Interview about Life Groups with Scott and Brenda Cashdollar and Immanuel Sitaki.

God's New Temple

Paul now transitions easily from describing the church as a household or family to describing the church as a house or a temple.^v Notice what he says in verses 20ff.

20 built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the chief cornerstone. 21 In him the whole building is joined together and rises to become a holy temple in the Lord. 22 And in him you too are being built together to become a dwelling in which God lives by his Spirit.

Paul graphically describes the church as a temple, complete with a foundation, cornerstone and walls, all composed of materials that are closely fit together and rise up to become the very dwelling of God.

In the coming weeks, I plan on coming back to several images used in the NT in order to probe deeper their meaning. One of those that we'll look at

more closely is the church as the temple of God. For now, notice just one facets of this temple: the cornerstone. The cornerstone of this building is Jesus Christ.

What does a cornerstone do? A cornerstone holds two walls together, in this case Jew and Gentile. The cornerstone controls the design of the building (in this case, the temple), bringing unity, harmony and symmetry to the structure. The cornerstone gives cohesion, direction and orientation.

The church of Jesus Christ, whether it be the universal church or the local church, will only know harmony and unity to the degree that its life and ministry is given direction by Jesus Christ. No one pastor is the cornerstone of Central Bible Church. The pastors and elders together are not the cornerstone of Central Bible Church. Cohesion, direction, harmony and unity are experienced at Central Bible Church only to the degree that we look to Christ, the cornerstone, to provide that.

Central Bible Church is a diverse church. We have boomers, builders and busters. We have po-mos and those from the depression era. We have those who like the music loud and we have those who like the music soft. We have more than ten different nationalities represented in our church. In Ephesians 2, the cornerstone brings symmetry and cohesion between two major cultural and religious groupings, Jew and Gentile. And for you and me, the cornerstone can do the same as we keep our eyes focused on Jesus.

ⁱ Lloyd-Jones, *God's Way*, 302 cited by John R.W. Stott, *God's New Society*, 105.

ⁱⁱ Cf. 1 Corinthians 10:32 where Paul refers to the church as a third community, distinct from both Jews and Greeks. John R.W. Stott, *God's New Society*, 105 n. 7.

ⁱⁱⁱ Cf in the Old Testament the "house of Judah" or "house of David." In the New Testament we see also this emphasis on the household: Acts 11:14 "you and all your household"; Gal. 6:10 "the household of faith."

^{iv} "The house and family are the smallest natural groups in the total structure of the congregation." (TDNT 5.130). Compare references to the house of Stephanas (1 Cor. 1:16), of Philemon (Phil. 2), of Cornelius (Acts 11.14), of Lydia (Acts 16:15), of the prison governor of Philippi (Ac 16.31), of Crispus (Ac 18.8), of Onesiphorus (2 Tim 1.16). See also Acts 20.20 -- "taught you publicly and from house to house;" Rom. 6.5 -- "Greet Prisca and Aquila ... also the church that is in their house;" and Col. 4.15 -- "Greet Nympha and the church that is in her house."

^v Otto Michel, "*oikos, oikia*," TDNT, ed. Gerhard Friedrich, 132.* Paul transitions easily from the image of the church as a body to that church as a building. This may be because among the ancients the human body was perceived as a building or a house (cf. 2 Cor 5:1; 2 Pet 1:14; John 2:19-21).