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Ephesians 2:11-22

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BEING BUILT TOGETHER

On January 20th, Barack Obama will deliver his inaugural address, laying out his vision for this country under his new administration. Having campaigned under the slogan, “Change we can believe in,” he will presumably lay out some of what that change might be. Here at PBCC we thought it would be good to give you an inaugural address for this year, to give you a vision for the year. What does it mean for us to be a church? What is the universal church, and what does it mean for us to be a local part of that here in Cupertino?

Of the many New Testament passages available I have selected Ephesians 2:11-22 to direct our thinking. I will focus particularly on the last four verses, but we need to look briefly at the preceding verses to appreciate Paul’s argument.

In the first three chapters of Ephesians, Paul delivers a powerful dose of theology. He has two primary purposes: to show the magnitude of the redemption that God has accomplished through Christ and is working out through his Spirit, and to show that Jews and Gentiles are equal recipients of this great salvation, being reconciled as one new person to God in Christ. In the second half of chapter 2 he continues to present these themes. Paul develops his argument in three stages (vv 11-13, 14-18, 19-22).

Therefore, remember that formerly you who are Gentiles by birth and called “uncircumcised” by those who call themselves “the circumcision” (which is done in the body by human hands)—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. But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far away have been brought near by the blood of Christ. (Eph 2:11-13 TNIV)

Throughout the first three chapters it is clear that Paul is addressing primarily Gentile believers. Here he calls on these “Gentiles by birth” to remember their dramatic change of status from what they formerly were to what they now are. Formerly, because of their birth as Gentiles, they were excluded in every imaginable way: without God, without Christ, without hope, excluded from God’s saving purposes. It is hard for us to appreciate the depth of the divide between Jew and Gentile, between the circumcised and the uncircumcised. It was a divide sanctioned by the purposes of God.

There’s a popular quip, “How odd of God to choose the Jews.” Why *did* God sanction this divide between Jew and Gentile? The election of Israel to be the recipient of his redemptive work was an important stage in redemption history. But we have to understand the background against which that election took place. It was odd of God to choose anyone. Abraham whom he did choose was no better than anyone else: he was a pagan idolater from Mesopotamia. God chose him only after it had become abundantly clear that humanity wandering east of Eden would not choose God, that the natural direction of mankind was away from God not towards him (Gen 4-11). Abraham’s former status didn’t matter; what mattered was God’s “but now.” He made a covenant with Abraham and his

descendants: he would be their God, they would be his people, and he would dwell with them. Henceforth there was an “in” group and an “out” group. The “in” group would develop into the nation Israel to whom God gave his Law, his covenant, his promises, and his presence. The “out” group was all the other nations. “Unfair,” you cry, “that one should be part of the ‘out’ group just because of birth.” But throughout the Old Testament, beginning with his inaugural address to Abraham (Gen 12:2-3), God showed that his intent was that all nations be blessed through Israel. Though the election of Abraham and the consequent divide between Jew and Gentile was part of God’s purposes, it was not the ultimate goal of those purposes.

Those days of exclusion are over. The statement, “But now in Christ Jesus” (v 13) changes everything. Formerly without Christ, these Gentiles are now in Christ. Formerly far away from God, they have now been brought near. The extension of salvation to the Gentiles, always foreseen in the Old Testament, has now happened in Christ. Their birth status no longer matters. This is true for us also. It doesn’t matter who or what we are by birth. What matters is whether we’ve come under that umbrella, “But now in Christ Jesus.”

This great contrast between the “formerly” and the “but now” is repeated elsewhere in the New Testament:

Once you were alienated from God and were enemies in your minds because of your evil behavior. But now he has reconciled you by Christ’s physical body through death to present you holy in his sight, without blemish and free from accusation. (Col 1:21-22)

Once you were not a people, but now you are the people of God; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy. (1 Pet 2:10)

The church is the community of those who have passed from the “formerly” to the “but now in Christ Jesus.” It doesn’t matter what that “formerly” is. God’s grace executed in Christ can cover it all. The “formerly” is gone. Paul specifically wants these Gentile Christians in Ephesus to remind themselves of this. It is good for us still to remind ourselves of this fundamental truth. To do so is conducive to healthy spiritual life. We don’t wallow in the “formerly.” Nor do we get puffed up by the “formerly.” Instead we rejoice in the “But now in Christ Jesus.” We give thanks to God for the great grace he has shown us in Christ, not holding our “formerly” against us, and instead declaring “but now.” And so the church is a community of thanksgiving. Thanks be to God!

Christ has brought the far off Gentiles near. Paul next shows how he has done this:

For he himself is our peace, who has made the two one and has destroyed the barrier, the dividing wall of hostility, by setting aside in his flesh the law with its commands and regulations. His purpose was to create in himself one new humanity out of the two, thus making peace, and in 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. (2:14-18)

Paul's verbs and pronouns change from second to first person: he is *our* peace; *we* both have access to the Father. Paul includes himself and other Jewish believers. As Paul so vividly illustrated in his own life "formerly," the Jews were in as much need of being brought near to God as were the Gentiles. Christ has established peace between Jew and Gentile and between both parties and God.

Four times Paul states that Christ has made the two into one. He did this by destroying the barrier that stood between Jew and Gentile, and by nullifying the law. This doesn't mean that the law was bad. The law, or Torah, was God's precious gift to Israel, showing the nation how to be holy as he is holy, so that he might live among them. It was a good gift, but it was for Israel only; it necessarily excluded the Gentiles. The Torah had run its course, it had served its purpose. Rather it had served two purposes: it had served as a guide to show ethnic Israel how to live, and it had served as a guardian pending the arrival of Christ (Gal 3:24-25). Once the Torah had led to Christ, its work was done. Christ rendered it null and void. No longer would God's people be directed by detailed commands and regulations. The Torah was not the only barrier between Jew and Gentile, and between the Gentiles and God. There was also a physical barrier. Gentiles were allowed into the outermost court of the temple, but around the inner limit of this Court of the Gentiles ran a balustrade, on which were mounted notices warning the Gentiles not to come any closer on pain of death.

Christ has abolished the hostility between Jew and Gentile not by making the Gentiles into Jews, but by doing something completely different. Making the Gentiles into Jews wouldn't have solved the problem because the Jews were in as much need of reconciliation to God as were the Gentiles. Instead, Christ has created the two into one new humanity. Notice the verb "created": it indicates how radically new is this new humanity. From Acts and Galatians we see how hard it was for the early church based in Jerusalem to come to terms with this. The issue was finally resolved at the Council of Jerusalem when the church leaders determined that it was indeed God's intention that Gentiles coming to faith in Jesus Christ not have to become Jews (Acts 15).

Notice the trinitarian nature of verse 18: Jew and Gentile on equal footing both have access *to the Father through Christ by one Spirit*. The goal is to reconcile humanity, both Jew and Gentile, to God so that we have access to him. This is accomplished through Christ's death on the cross and through the Spirit whom God pours into us that we might be set aside for himself. It is the Spirit in us, no longer the law with its commands and regulations, that makes us holy and therefore acceptable in God's presence. The church is God's new society where all are reconciled.

In the final section of this passage Paul returns to the second person "you" to address the Gentile believers, to show how fully they have now been incorporated into God's purposes:

Consequently, you are no longer foreigners and strangers, but fellow citizens with God's people and also members of his 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. (2:19-22)

Paul again reminds the Gentile believers of the contrast between their former status and their current status. No longer excluded but now included. No longer unwelcome but now fully enfolded. Gentiles have equal status with Jews as members of God's household. Indeed it is more radical than that: there is no longer any distinction between Jew and Gentile. The two have been united together to form one new humanity which forms the household of God. The New Testament uses a couple of different metaphors to describe this family of God. In some places it refers to it as a body made up of many parts with Jesus Christ as the head. Here, as elsewhere, it uses the metaphor of a building. This building has three components: Christ Jesus is the chief cornerstone, the apostles and prophets are the foundation, and the individual believers, whether Jew or Gentile, are all the individual building stones. This is the church, but it's not a physical building. As we all know, the church is people: the people of God.

Within this edifice that is God's people, Christ Jesus is the chief cornerstone. Nowadays a cornerstone, if used, is merely a ceremonial stone inscribed with a dedication and set in place or unveiled with some ceremony. It is not essential to the structure of the building. But in ancient buildings the cornerstone was far more than just ceremonial. It really was the most important stone in the building. It was the first stone laid in the foundation. It had to be true for its sides defined the direction for the rest of the foundation and hence for the whole building.

Three times in the Old Testament the Lord used the metaphor of laying a stone to describe his purposes. The response of God's people would be mixed. Those trusting in him would find the stone to be a reliable cornerstone (Isa 28:16); those rebelling would stumble against the stone (Isa 8:14-15), and find the very thing they rejected set by God as his cornerstone (Ps 118:22).

And so it has proven to be. The New Testament writers recognized that Jesus Christ is this stone set by God. Jesus Christ is our sure foundation, and so we sing, "The Church's one foundation is Jesus Christ her Lord." We proclaim this Jesus to be the stone laid by God. This provokes a mixed reaction from people. Some find him to be a sure cornerstone for new life. Others find him to be a stumbling block. "But we preach Christ crucified: a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles" (1 Cor 1:23). The Greek word there for stumbling block is *skandalon*. At the heart of the gospel is "the offense (*skandalon*) of the cross" (Gal 5:11).

At the cornerstone of the church lies a scandal: that God saves sinners through the death of his own son. All those who are relying upon their own accomplishments or their own birth will stumble over this stone. But those who know that their "formerly" amounts to nothing in God's eyes will find this stone to be not a scandal but a precious cornerstone. The church holds fast to a cross-centered life. We don't try to water down the gospel to make it more palatable. The church is to be a beacon to the saving purposes of God in Christ. We hold out to the world the possibility of "but now in Christ Jesus."

Secondly, the church is built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets. These were the ones who received revelation from God and faithfully passed it on. We consider their proclamation of this revelation to be authoritative. These apostles and prophets are no longer with us, but they have left us their proclamation in the

books of the New Testament. So, to say that the church is built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets is to say that it is built upon the foundation of the apostolic teaching contained in the New Testament. And so we commit ourselves to the study and teaching of the Scriptures, for these bear testimony to what God has done in Christ. The Scriptures are our authority.

It is important to observe that there are many other things that do not form our foundation: tradition, or rules and regulations, or human leaders. There is good and bad tradition: Jaroslav Pelikan observed that tradition is the living faith of the dead while traditionalism is the dead faith of the living. The tradition that we do hold to is the apostolic teaching of the New Testament which we receive, guard and pass on to the next generation. The traditionalism we reject is all the additions that we find so easy to make; the church has been very busy for 2000 years expanding its traditions.

Rules and regulations are not part of our foundation. God gave Israel the Torah with its rules and regulations to show his people how to live. Christ has rendered the Torah null and void. How do we know what to do if we don't have a book of rules and regulations? God has put his Spirit in us to do what the Torah could not do: change us from the inside. As the Spirit moves in us we find out what pleases God and we do it; thereby we are holy as God is holy. The goal is still the same, but the engine has changed: no longer the Law but now the Spirit.

Nor do we consider post-apostolic leaders to be part of the foundation. This doesn't mean we ignore those who have gone before. The Lord has raised up many wise people over the past 2000 years; we ignore them to our loss. I'm very conscious that we stand on the shoulders of those who have gone before. But they're not authoritative in the same way the apostles were authoritative. We have leaders in this church but the church is not built upon them. Sadly it didn't take long for the early church to formalize church office and for the leaders to assume more authority than they really have.

Upon this foundation of the apostolic teaching with Christ Jesus as the cornerstone, the whole structure rises. The building blocks of this structure are all the individual members of God's household, people like you and me. As Peter wrote, "you also, like living stones, are being built into a spiritual house" (1 Pet 2:5). Paul says that the whole building is joined together. Every individual stone has a place into which it is fitted. This is an amazing truth: all the millions of Christians throughout time and space are being fitted together to form the church, this edifice for God. Paul uses this same verb again in chapter 4:

From him [Christ] the whole body, joined and held together by every supporting ligament, grows and builds itself up in love, as each part does its work. (Eph 4:16)

The church is made up of each and every one of us. We each have a place. We each have a part to play. It's God's responsibility to select the stones and put each one where he wants it. He has already transformed us from what we formerly were to what we now are in Christ. He goes further: through his Spirit he gives each of us spiritual gifts so that we might play our part. He has a role for each of us to play within the edifice that is the church. It's his responsibility to ensure an appropriate distribution of gifts so that each local church can function as a body. Among these gifts, God gives gifts of leadership so that the body is shepherded; gifts of teaching and wisdom so that it is instructed; gifts of help and mercy so that it is comforted.

Some of these gifts we formally recognize. Some of the leaders we formally set aside as elders. Some of the teachers we formally set aside full-time as pastors. Some of the helpers we formally set aside as deacons. But this doesn't mean that it is only those set aside who do the work. We recognize no distinction between clergy and laity. The formal recognition of someone as an elder, a pastor or a deacon does not ordain or initiate someone into that office. The opposite is true: we appoint people to office only after they have already been serving informally in that capacity.

The most important passage for PBC's understanding of how it functions as a church is Ephesians 4:11-12,

So Christ himself gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the pastors and teachers, to equip his people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up... (Eph 4:11-12)

The role of pastors and teachers is to equip the saints so that we all together do the work of ministry. The work of ministry is not just for a professional clergy. It's for all those gifted by God, which means all of God's people. All of us are stones in this building.

Paul told the church in Corinth:

There are different kinds of gifts, but the same Spirit distributes them. There are different kinds of service, but the same Lord. There are different kinds of working, but in all of them and in everyone it is the same God at work. Now to each one the manifestation of the Spirit is given for the common good. (1 Cor 12:4-7)

After listing some of the gifts he concluded,

All these are the work of one and the same Spirit, and he distributes them to each one, just as he determines. (1 Cor 12:11)

But the church in Corinth evidently had trouble accepting this principle. Paul rebuked them using irony: if the foot were upset that it weren't a hand, or the ear that it weren't an eye, how could the body function?

But in fact God has placed the parts in the body, every one of them, just as he wanted them to be. If they were all one part, where would the body be? As it is, there are many parts, but one body. (1 Cor 12:18-20)

Through his Spirit God has equipped every one of his people so that the church functions. Furthermore he also prepares the work for each one of us to do:

We are God's handiwork, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do. (Eph 2:10)

This is liberating and exciting. Our role as leaders is not to harrangue you or pressure you to serve. An ever-present danger is to confuse our pet projects with what the Lord is doing. No, our role is to help foster spiritual growth and then see what God does. We cannot predict what he will do and who he will use. In the twenty-plus years I've been part of PBC it has been amazing to see whom the Lord raises up for works of service and what those works of service are.

How then do you find your spiritual gift? How do you find your place? I suggest that it's not by taking a battery of tests. Rather, if you're growing spiritually and willing for God to use you, then it is very likely that you'll find that God is indeed using you.

Here then is what the church is, both the church universal and PBCC as a local part of that body. We are a community of those who

have been transformed from “formerly” to “but now in Christ.” We are a community drawn from all manner of backgrounds and reconciled together into one new humanity. We are like a building, built upon the foundation of the apostles and their teaching with Christ Jesus as the cornerstone. Each and every one of us is like an individual stone in that building, all joined together so that each one is important. The whole entity is God’s temple, where he is pleased to dwell through his Spirit. When this whole building is joined and together, built on the foundation of the apostolic teaching, with Christ Jesus as the cornerstone, then it achieves its purpose as a holy temple, that is, a fit dwelling for God.

Note that this last section is again trinitarian. It is in Christ Jesus that all the parts are built together. The structure rises to become a fit dwelling place for God. And God takes up his residence in this structure through his Spirit. Indeed it is through his Spirit that he is at work to make it a holy temple. And God puts the whole thing on display, as shown by the text on the bulletin cover:

His intent was that now, through the church, the manifold wisdom of God should be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly realms, according to his eternal purpose that he accomplished in Christ Jesus our Lord. (Eph 3:10-11)

So, as we embark on 2009, may God be at work in each one of us through his Spirit. He has given us each gifts to use in serving him. He has marked out for each of us a place in this building that he is assembling through his Spirit, a place where we fit into his holy temple. As God moves through us by his Spirit, may we function as a body, as a building, to be a fit dwelling place for God. And may we be a fit display of God’s redemptive purposes in Christ Jesus.

One of the ways we can best give expression to the fact that we are together the body of Christ is to share communion together. As we come to the table now to eat and drink these tokens of Christ’s death we remind ourselves that it is through that death on the cross that our status is changed from “formerly” to “but now in Christ.” We re-affirm that Christ is our cornerstone. We re-affirm that we are together the body of Christ, reconciled together to God, with whom we can now share a fellowship meal.

Now may the God of peace, who through the blood of the eternal covenant brought back from the dead our Lord Jesus, that great Shepherd of the sheep, equip you with everything good for doing his will, and may he work in us what is pleasing to him, through Jesus Christ, to whom be glory for ever and ever. Amen. (Heb 13:20-21)

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