

EPHESIANS

The Church's Identity in Christ

Introduction

- Paul wrote the letter around AD 60-61 during his Roman imprisonment to churches in Southwestern Asia Minor
- Ephesians is the least situational of all Paul's letters because it does not explicitly address any specific problem
- As a circular letter, it is a manifesto for the church, describing (1) its identity—who it is, how it came about, how it must conduct itself in the world, and (2) its mission in the world
- The major theme is stated in 1:10: "he purposed in Christ, to be put into effect when the times reach their fulfillment—to bring unity to all things in heaven and on earth under Christ"

Introduction

- This theme presupposes that the cosmos does not reflect the condition in which God created it. The unity and harmony of creation was ruptured (Rom 8:18-22) and needed a reconciliation or new creation to recover the original state
- ¹⁸I consider that our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us. ¹⁹For the creation waits in eager expectation for the children of God to be revealed. ²⁰For the creation was subjected to frustration, not by its own choice, but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope ²¹that the creation itself will be liberated from its bondage to decay and brought into the freedom and glory of the children of God.
- Paul carries out the theme of reconciliation to emphasize the creation of a new humanity between Jews and Gentiles

Structure

- **Chapters 1-3:** Doctrinal—describing how the church must understand its identity within God's vision of cosmic unity in Christ
- **Chapter 4-6:** Ethical—exhorting the church to conduct itself in light of its calling within God's plan for peace and unity in Christ

Christian Identity

- We are chosen and adopted (1:4-6)
- We are redeemed and forgiven (1:7-8)
- We are shown God's high mystery (1:9-10)
- We are sealed by the Holy Spirit our deposit (1:11-14)

Paul's Prayer for the Church

- That believers would know God better:
 - "I keep asking that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the glorious Father, may give you the Spirit of wisdom and revelation, so that you may know him better" (1:17)
- That believer would see spiritual realities that we may know:
 - "the hope to which he has called you,"
 - "the riches of his glorious inheritance in his holy people,"
 - "and his incomparably great power for us who believe" (1:18-19)

God's Plan for the Church

- God chose the church before the creation of the world (1:4), and made known to it his plan of uniting all things in Christ:
- “he made known to us the mystery of his will according to his good pleasure, which he purposed in Christ, ¹⁰to be put into effect when the times reach their fulfillment—to bring unity to all things in heaven and on earth under Christ” (1:9-10)
- Central to this plan is the unity of the church
- The unity of the church is formed on our vertical reconciliation to God (2:1-10):

Reconciliation with God (2:1-10)

- **2** As for you, you were dead in your transgressions and sins, ²in which you used to live when you followed the ways of this world and of the ruler of the kingdom of the air, the spirit who is now at work in those who are disobedient. ³All of us also lived among them at one time, gratifying the cravings of our flesh and following its desires and thoughts. Like the rest, we were by nature deserving of wrath. ⁴But because of his great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, ⁵made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions—it is by grace you have been saved. ⁶And God raised us up with Christ and seated us with him in the heavenly realms in Christ Jesus, ⁷in order that in the coming ages he might show the incomparable riches of his grace, expressed in his kindness to us in Christ Jesus. ⁸For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God— ⁹not by works, so that no one can boast. ¹⁰For we are God's handiwork, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do.

Reconciliation between Jew and Gentile (2:11-22)

- The vertical reconciliation forms the horizontal reconciliation:
 - ¹¹ 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)— ¹² 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. ¹³ But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far away have been brought near by the blood of Christ.
 - ¹⁴ For he himself is our peace, who has made the two groups one and has destroyed the barrier, the dividing wall of hostility, ¹⁵ 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, ¹⁶ and in one body to reconcile both of them to God through the cross, by which he put to death their hostility. ¹⁷ He came and preached peace to you who were far away and peace to those who were near. ¹⁸ For through him we both have access to the Father by one Spirit.
 - ¹⁹ Consequently, you are no longer foreigners and strangers, but fellow citizens with God’s people and also members of his 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

The Union of Jews and Gentile in One Body

- ³ For this reason I, Paul, the prisoner of Christ Jesus for the sake of you Gentiles—
- ² Surely you have heard about the administration of God's grace that was given to me for you, ³ that is, the mystery made known to me by revelation, as I have already written briefly. ⁴ In reading this, then, you will be able to understand my insight into the mystery of Christ, ⁵ which was not made known to people in other generations as it has now been revealed by the Spirit to God's holy apostles and prophets. ⁶ This mystery is that through the gospel the Gentiles are heirs together with Israel, members together of one body, and sharers together in the promise in Christ Jesus (3:1-6)

The Union of Jews and Gentile in One Body

- ⁷I became a servant of this gospel by the gift of God's grace given me through the working of his power. ⁸Although I am less than the least of all the Lord's people, this grace was given me: to preach to the Gentiles the boundless riches of Christ, ⁹and to make plain to everyone the administration of this mystery, which for ages past was kept hidden in God, who created all things. ¹⁰His 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, ¹¹according to his eternal purpose that he accomplished in Christ Jesus our Lord. ¹²In him and through faith in him we may approach God with freedom and confidence. ¹³I ask you, therefore, not to be discouraged because of my sufferings for you, which are your glory (3:7-

Paul's Second Prayer for the Church

- Paul then prays again that his readers will comprehend the love of Christ and love one another (3:14-21) so they can live out the unity they have in Christ

Paul's Second Prayer for the Church

- ¹⁴ For this reason I kneel before the Father, ¹⁵ from whom every family in heaven and on earth derives its name. ¹⁶ I pray that out of his glorious riches he may strengthen you with power through his Spirit in your inner being, ¹⁷ so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith. And I pray that you, being rooted and established in love, ¹⁸ may have power, together with all the Lord's holy people, to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ, ¹⁹ and to know this love that surpasses knowledge—that you may be filled to the measure of all the fullness of God. ²⁰ Now to him who is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, according to his power that is at work within us, ²¹ to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, for ever and ever! Amen (3:14-21)

Conclusions

- Christian identity is critical to spiritual formation
- God's plan involves the reconciliation and unity of all things under the rule of Christ
- Christian unity in the church is predicated upon our vertical relationship with God
- Our knowledge of Christ's love determines the extent to which we can live out our spiritual unity
- Yang Feng-gang, a Chinese sociologist, describes Christian identity formation as involving various factors, including Christian, ethnic, and national identities

Application

- Our understanding of how God sees us is very critical for spiritual formation
- How we see each other in the church is also a very important factor toward cultivating spiritual unity