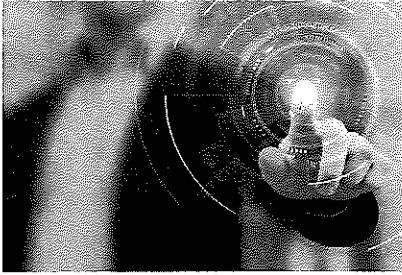


Building Unity in Christ



Topic

Unity in Christ

Theme

God made believers, including Jews and Gentiles, one in Christ to accomplish His mission on earth.

Desired Response

The learner will strive for unity in the local church.

Materials

- Visual 14.

Scripture Focus

Ephesians 2:11–22

Summary

This lesson focuses on God's work of breaking down the wall that separated Jews and Gentiles so that all who are in Christ are also one with one another. Saved Jews and saved Gentiles have equal access to God.

Outline

I. Gentile Separation from Christ (Eph. 2:11, 12)

- A. Heathen (2:11)
- B. Without Christ (2:12)
- C. Strangers (2:12)

II. Union in Christ (Eph. 2:13–22)

- A. Person of peace (2:13, 14)
- B. Program for peace (2:14–18)
- C. Pictures of peace (2:19–22)
 - 1. Fellow citizens (2:19)
 - 2. Family members (2:19)
 - 3. Building blocks (2:20, 21)
 - 4. Holy temple (2:21, 22)

Memory Verse

"For he is our peace, who hath made both one, and hath broken down the middle wall of partition between us" (Ephesians 2:14).

GETTING STARTED

Walls and Fences

Point out that walls and fences define the landscape in many neighborhoods.

ASK: Why might people build walls or fences around their properties? (Q1)

ASK: Would you rather live in a neighborhood of adjoining lawns or a neighborhood of fenced-in yards? Why? (Q2)

Paul used a broken-down wall to illustrate the unity believers have in Christ. His teaching should draw us closer as believers and encourage us to be unified in our work for the Lord.

Church Walls

ASK: What figurative walls might church members erect between themselves? *Walls that separate people according to generation, level of spirituality, friendship circles, social levels, personal preferences, or marital status.*

Paul used a broken-down wall to illustrate the unity believers have in Christ. His teaching should draw us closer as believers and encourage us to be unified in our work for the Lord despite obvious differences in our lives.

SEARCHING THE SCRIPTURES

For many years, the Berlin Wall separated East Berliners from West Berliners. Many people believed the wall would stand forever, but finally in 1989 freedom-loving people pressured the Soviet Union to tear it down. Now the city and the country are united. In Ephesians 2:11–14 Paul wrote about a wall that had stood for centuries before God broke it down.

I. Gentile Separation from Christ (Eph. 2:11, 12)

Addressing the Gentile believers separately and directly, Paul urged them to remember their previous condition (Eph. 2:11). He highlighted three points about their former condition.

A. Heathen (2:11)

First, Paul wanted the Ephesians to remember they were “Gentiles in the flesh,” meaning uncircumcised heathen. They did not carry the physical mark the Jews used to identify their covenant relationship with God. The Jews called the Gentile heathen the uncircumcision. By applying this nickname to the Gentiles, the Jews implied that the Gentiles were unclean and profane. But Paul described the Jews as “the Circumcision in the flesh made by hands” to indicate that the Jews’ circumcision was only an external show of religion. The Jews of Paul’s day believed the sign of circumcision made them special in God’s eyes and better than the Gentiles. They were wrong. No outward sign has any effect on one’s heart.

Paul's point then, was to remind the Gentiles that they had been profane and unclean heathen before trusting in Christ.

B. Without Christ (2:12)

Second, Paul taught that before salvation, the Ephesian Gentiles were without Christ (2:12). To be "without Christ" means they had no Savior. They were lost and destined to suffer forever in the Lake of Fire. Today, too, this plight extends to every unsaved man, woman, and child.

ASK: What word would you use to sum up the life of every believer before trusting Christ as Savior? (Q3) *Perhaps hopeless or dead.*

The Ephesian Gentiles were also "aliens from the commonwealth of Israel." They had no part among God's Chosen People and had no claim on God's specific promises to Israel. They were on the outside.

C. Strangers (2:12)

Third, in their unsaved past, the Ephesians were "strangers from the covenants of promise" (2:12). Because God's special, specific Covenants applied only to Israel, the Gentile Ephesians had no claim to them. Even when Gentiles are born again, they do not become part of Israel but part of the church. Jews saved in the current Church Age also become part of Christ's church.

The church has not and will not inherit the Covenants God made with Israel. When we were born again, we received a new heart and the promise of eternal life with Christ. And while we won't inherit the Promised Land, we will reign with Christ in His Kingdom (2 Tim. 2:11, 12; Heb. 10:22). We will witness the fulfillment of God's Covenants with Israel.

When they were strangers and aliens from God and His people, the Ephesian Gentiles were "without God in the world" (Eph. 2:12). They had idols and worshiped them, but they had no knowledge of the one true God. They were surrounded by their pagan worldly culture that kept them in spiritual ignorance, and they refused to acknowledge the true God.

People today might feel superior to the Ephesian Gentiles because they are sophisticated and live in a highly advanced culture, but no one merits acceptance with God by being civilized. Only faith in Jesus Christ makes a person acceptable in God's sight.

ASK: Looking back at your life before salvation, do you see yourself as being a stranger from God? Explain. (Q4)

II. Union in Christ (Eph. 2:13–22)

A. Person of peace (2:13, 14)

Ephesians 2:13 introduces the contrast between the Ephesians' new spiritual status and their former spiritual status. The three words "in Christ Jesus" explain the difference. "In Christ Jesus" they were saved. They had become partakers of the divine nature. They were born again.

Because of their union with Christ, the Gentiles' spiritual status radically

As mentioned in lesson 2, at Christ's return to earth, God will regenerate Israel (New Covenant; Jer. 31:31–34), gather them together (Land Covenant; Deut. 30:1–3), give them the entire Promised Land (Abrahamic Covenant; Gen. 15:18–21), and set up Christ to rule from David's throne (Davidic Covenant; 2 Sam. 7:12–14). Israel will be a distinct nation of believers living in the Promised Land with Christ on their throne and enjoying specific privileges in fulfillment of God's promises to them.

changed. Previously they had been “far off” from the Chosen People. The Jew and the Gentile were separated by a chasm of racial hatred. They were also “far off” from God Himself. The “blood of Christ” made it possible for the Gentiles to be reconciled to God and to Jewish believers.

In the phrase, “for he is our peace” (2:14), the word “our” refers to both Jewish Christians and Gentile Christians. The word for “peace” refers to joining things together. Christ is our peace because He gives us peace in our hearts. When two factions have peace, they can be joined together and be at peace with one another.

ASK: How has salvation affected your relationships with fellow believers?
(Q5)

B. Program for peace (2:14–18)

Paul went on to write that Christ “made both one” (2:14). This union encompasses far more than a friendship. It is a unity brought about by a divine act of Christ. But being united does not necessarily bring peace. Christ carried out a three-step program to bring about peace within the union.

First, He has “broken down the middle wall of partition” (2:14). For centuries an invisible wall of hatred, mistrust, and disdain had separated Jews and Gentiles.

ASK: What Bible accounts indicate that a “wall” separated the Jews from the Gentiles? (Q6) *Accounts of Jonah, the Samaritan woman at Jacob’s well, Peter’s reluctance to go to the home of Cornelius, Peter’s snubbing Gentiles at a meal when Jews arrived.*

A literal wall in the temple demonstrated the Jews’ disdain for the Gentiles. The wall separated the court of the Gentiles from the rest of the temple. A sign on the wall warned in Hebrew, “No foreigner may enter within the barricade which surrounds the sanctuary and encloser. Anyone who is caught doing so will have himself to blame for his ensuing death.” Christ broke down the animosity that drove the Jews to post that sign.

The wall of division between Jews and Gentiles arose because the Jews had lost sight of an important truth: God intended them to be the channel through which He would bring salvation to the world. Jews had come to think of themselves as better than Gentiles. They lacked the love and compassion God wanted them to show the world. Christ broke down the wall, however, and provided for healing of the enmity that had existed between these two groups (2:15).

Second, Christ also abolished “the law of commandments contained in ordinances” (Eph. 2:15). “Law” here refers to the whole Mosaic system. The Dispensation of the Law has ended; we now live in the Age of Grace. When Christ came “in the flesh” (2:15) and died on the cross, He fulfilled the law (Matt. 5:17), meaning He lived up to the perfect standard demanded by the law (1 Pet. 2:22) and bore vicariously the curse of the law so that in Him the world might be blessed (Gal. 3:8, 9, 13, 14).

Because of Christ’s work, the Christian is not under the law but under grace, and the Jewish believer is saved on the same spiritual basis as the Gentile believer. Both Jew and Gentile enjoy full acceptance with God through Jesus Christ apart from legal ordinances.

“Man” in verse 15 is a generic term and includes male and female.

Third, Christ took two and made one. The two are the Jewish believer and the Gentile believer. The “one new man” (2:15) is the church, the Body of Christ. Paul’s word “make” indicates that Christ has created something that did not previously exist. It is “new” because the church did not exist in Old Testament times. It is also new because every saved individual is a new creation in Christ (2 Cor. 5:17).

ASK: How should the designation “one new man in Christ” affect the way believers today view one another? (Q7) *They should view each other as equal in standing but different in function; they should care for each other like they would care for themselves; they should seek to settle disputes and disagreements in a timely manner.*

Not only did the Jews and Gentiles need to be reconciled to each other, but they also both needed to be reconciled to God. The word “reconcile” in Ephesians 2:16 means “to restore something to its original condition.” Originally humanity was not divided. Adam and Eve enjoyed a right relationship with each other and with God. In Christ, this condition is restored. All believers are members of one Body and are perfect in God’s sight.

ASK: What might disunity in a local church do to the testimony of Christ’s work on the cross? (Q8) *Disunity makes the work of the cross seem inadequate or even artificial.*

Paul explained that Christ proclaimed peace to those who were far (Gentiles) and those who were near (Jews) (2:17). Now, “through him we both have access by one Spirit unto the Father” (2:18). God has opened the door of Heaven to us. We will enter Heaven someday, and we will live there forever in perfect bliss. Even now, though, we can access God through prayer. According to Hebrews 4:16, God invites all of us to “come boldly unto the throne of grace, that we may obtain mercy, and find grace to help in time of need.”

ASK: How might equal access to the Father’s throne of grace serve as a unifying factor among believers? (Q9) *Prayer is a great privilege. Since we all share access to the Father through prayer, no one should feel superior or inferior.*

Note that the wall of separation God broke down has nothing to do with doctrinal differences. Paul’s teaching is not a call for all denominations to set aside their differences and work together. In other passages Paul emphasized doctrinal purity. He commanded Timothy, for example, to preach the Word in anticipation of a time when people will reject the truth and seek teachers who will tell them what they want to hear (2 Tim. 4:1–5). Unity in a church is impossible if the members have no doctrinal basis for their unity.

C. Pictures of peace (2:19–22)

In the last four verses of chapter 2, Paul used four metaphors to express the unity of Jewish and Gentile believers in Christ.

1. Fellow citizens (2:19)

The first metaphor is that of citizenship. Paul wrote, “Ye are no more strangers

and foreigners, but fellowcitizens with the saints” (2:19). The word “strangers” is a synonym for “aliens.” The word translated “foreigners” identifies residents who do not belong to the country in which they reside. This had been the condition of the Gentile Ephesians. However, God made them “fellowcitizens.” In Christ, they had every right the Jewish believers had.

ASK: What responsibilities do fellow citizens have to one another? (Q10)

Fellow citizens should defend one another against common enemies, abide by laws, and provide for one another in times of disaster.

ASK: How do those responsibilities apply to the citizen relationship believers share in Christ? (Q11) *Believers have a responsibility to stand in spiritual battle with one another, to obey the Lord in living rightly with one another, and to help one another in times of need.*

2. Family members (2:19)

The second metaphor is that of a family. The Gentile believers became members “of the household of God” (2:19). Instead of being outsiders, as they had been in their unregenerate days, they were members of God’s family.

ASK: What responsibilities do family members have toward one another?

(Q12) *Family members should love one another unconditionally, care for one another when hardships come, provide for one another’s needs, and do their part to help the family grow together.*

ASK: How do those responsibilities apply to the family relationship believers share? (Q13) *Believers in the family of God should love unconditionally, show genuine care during times of need, and contribute to a growing relationship, including lovingly confronting those who aren’t living for the Lord.*

3. Building blocks (2:20, 21)

The third metaphor is that of a building whose foundation is “the apostles and prophets” (2:20). The apostles were Peter, James, John, and the other men Christ specifically sent into the world as His empowered representatives. Paul was probably part of this group too. “The prophets” may have been the New Testament prophets of the first Christian generation.

The chief cornerstone for the building is Jesus Christ. The chief cornerstone serves as a guide for the construction of the rest of the building. This building, of course, is the church, which comprises all born-again believers regardless of ethnicity.

ASK: How might a local church practically look to Christ as its chief cornerstone? (Q14) *By bathing decisions in prayer; through a pastor who is committed to God’s will and not his own; by discipling believers to be Christlike; by using the Word of God as its guide.*

4. Holy temple (2:21, 22)

The church is also a “holy temple in the Lord” (2:21). Not only is the Lord in

the temple, but the temple is also in the Lord. All who comprise this building are in Christ.

ASK: Why should being the temple of the Holy Spirit help believers unify?
(Q15) *The Holy Spirit indwells and empowers believers. As believers surrender to the Holy Spirit in them, their desires and goals begin to align.*

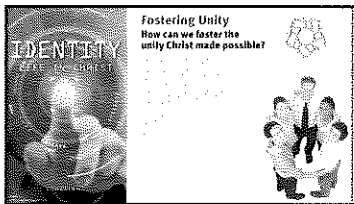
The temple of Christ, the church, is continuing to build and “grow.” In fact, it has been growing since Christ founded it and it will continue to grow until He receives it at the Rapture.

Christ church exists as a place where God dwells (2:22). How well do we reveal His presence in us?

MAKING IT PERSONAL

Working toward Unity

DISPLAY: Visual 14—Fostering Unity. **ASK:** How can we foster the unity Christ made possible? (Q16) *Be in the Word together; settle disagreements; live by the Holy Spirit; recognize good service; have a clear doctrinal base; seek to glorify God.*



Reconciliation

Challenge learners to do their part to preserve unity in their local church by pursuing any necessary reconciliation with other church members. (Q17)

Memory Verse

Encourage your learners to memorize Ephesians 2:14. Give them an opportunity to say the verse in class next week.