

YOU BELONG

The Ephesian church was troubled from the start (see Acts 19) and continued to experience challenges both typical and atypical to infant New Testament churches (see 1 & 2 Timothy and Revelation 2:1-7). The apostle Paul invested two years personally ministering to this group—developing a close, special relationship with them, while also foreseeing some of their future problems (see Acts 20:13-38).

One problem in particular was the challenge of harmonious assimilation for all into that new concept of a multi-ethnic faith community that the church was. This community in Ephesus was largely made up of non-Jews, but the long shadow of God's covenant relationship with the Jews remained. The non-Jews were having a difficult time accepting their placement within the church due to not previously having that covenant relationship—exacerbated, no doubt, by many Jews who had the same difficulty for them for the same reasons. So Paul speaks to this; speaks to placement and position for all in God's community.

Choseness (1:3-14)

Paul uses language such as “chosen,” “predestined,” “adopted,” and “included” to underscore his point about placement—about how God specifically planned for non-Jews to join the Jews in covenant with him. Furthermore this was God's decision before creation—to one day create a multi-ethnic faith community, which was brought about by Christ and sealed by the Spirit. It was to be a community that would mirror the unity of God himself. Everyone within this community, the church, would become “God's possession.” History did not matter, in that; God's adoption now trumped it. The non-Jews in Ephesus had the same access to the promises and blessings of God as the Jews, who came to him in faith through Christ. They were chosen. They belonged.

God is Able. You are Able (1:15-2:10)

Next Paul speaks about power and empowerment. The city of Ephesus was an epicenter of religion in ancient Rome, where in most superstition and magic played a major role. Lots of gods to possess, impress, appease and appeal to for favors, but for the Ephesian Christians that was supposed to be all over. Christ supplanted and exposed all of that through the power of his resurrection—the same power available to the Ephesian Christians to enable them to live out their placement in the kingdom (something Paul would explore more in 4:17-5:33). No need to return to the “ways of the world” along with behavior related to that. Their life in Christ was alive with power beyond what they could imagine (3:20-21). Being placed thusly and empowered accordingly, God had specific plans for them as his “workmanship.” God was able and so were they.

Peaceful Reconciliation (2:11-122)

In this section Paul reinforces the idea of placement, while also emphasizing the need for peace, harmony and unity in the new multi-ethnic faith community. His words also speak directly to identity. Formerly the non-Jews were excluded from the covenant—“foreigners” is the term he uses. But Christ changed that. He demolished the barriers of separation inherent with the Law in order to create this new community—the church. Hostility should no longer be the defining force between the Jew and non-Jew in this community. Instead peace and reconciliation would. This

would call for new thinking about identity. No one is an alien, stranger or foreigner anymore. Everyone who comes to Christ in faith belongs as “citizens”. Paul imagines it as a kind of new temple with Christ as head and foundation—with all others being an integral, connected part of the building. For this to be realized, Jews would have to no longer primarily self-identify as Jews. The same would be true for non-Jews. Their primary identity would be as citizens of God’s kingdom. This then would allow the hostility to end and a united community of peace and harmony to emerge emphasizing reconciliation instead of hatred and division. Truly a place of belonging! Paul would urge even more specifically this kind of unity in 4:1-6 and ask them to “make every effort” to bring it about.

But it would not be easy. Generations of suspicion, prejudice and hatred would have to be overcome. These feelings ran deep and the transformation into self-identifying primarily as a Christian—even before ethnicity—would take time. And this not just in Ephesus, but in almost every New Testament church. Yet it was completely necessary if the church was going to make an impact.

The Good News that they preached—centered of course on Jesus—included reconciliation; becoming part of a community where the old ways of thinking, identifying and behaving were replaced by a new paradigm. Here everyone—regardless of race, background, social status, gender was welcome to follow Jesus equally together with the same access to the Father through the Spirit. Former identities would be replaced and redefined through Jesus. Accepted cultural pressure points and social conditioning that brought division would be overcome by the grace of Jesus lived out in the community. Everything would change—all relationships—between Jews and non-Jews; slave and free; men and women; husband and wife; children and parents. Destructive personal behavior would be put away and be replaced by healthy, others-centered behavior. People would be “made new in the attitude of your minds” in order to “put on a new self, created to be like God in true righteousness and holiness.” (4:23).

This was God’s plan. To this they were chosen. Through Christ they belonged completely without reservation. He empowered them in this process and through his Spirit to be able to actually live reconciliation out and create this community of peace and harmony. And what a witness it would be! It would literally change the world.

A Witness Still Needed

The parallels between Ephesus and us are numerous. We continue to live in a world intent on hostility, where peace and reconciliation are drowned out in other, louder, destructive and hate-filled voices. The challenge of self-identifying first and primarily as citizens of the kingdom remains. It often runs headlong into cultural conventional thinking. But the call remains—we are to be made new, completely, nor partially new. While the world seeks to divide, our message and actions are about reconciliation, peace and acceptance. We cannot afford to “follow the ways of the world”—allowing that to set our agendas. We must make “every effort” to maintain unity. We need to be open for the power of God to work within us in ways we cannot ask or imagine. What a transforming force this beautiful multi-ethnic, welcoming, united faith community can still be! I pray we are up for this wonderful challenge.