

Different, yet United

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June 20, 2021

Ephesians 2:8-22

Every once in a while I think about just how different we all are. We come from different backgrounds, cultures, and languages. Even if we're Christian, we have different things that we value in the details of how we live our faith, and how we read the Bible. It's easy to get distracted by our differences. In the past, I've mentioned that it's sometimes easier for very different people to get along than it is for people who are very similar. When someone is obviously different, we seem to be able to respectfully accept that person "as a stranger" or as someone who is really not part of our close friendship groups. It's way easier, though, to get tense over differences when people are almost the same. Deep down we may feel like, "Oh, we're so similar! Too bad, you're just a little different in this particular area! Why can't you understand and see that my way is right?" The tensions get even worse when they're between two Christians. The faith-related things you believe in become so important, because you've based your life on them! I imagine that one reason the church has been a place of conflict since its beginning is because of this. Yet, as we look to faithfully following Jesus Christ, we can be united, even though we have differences in the details. Jews and Gentiles (non-Jews) were very different, yet they worshipped together as followers of Christ. We are made one in Christ. As Paul says in Ephesians, "he is our peace."

We all have our own unique ways of thinking. And, it's hard to admit when we're wrong and that we sometimes need to change. Imagine a New York City subway scene where there are two men, one white and one black. One is wearing a business suit and the other is in worker's overalls. One is giving his money to the other who is threatening him with a knife... What do you see? For many people, they assume that a black man is robbing a white businessman... But, the opposite could also be true! What if it's the black man who is wearing the suit and being robbed by a white labourer? There was a study done that shows how hard it is to admit that some of our deepest beliefs are sometimes incorrect.

... A group of white, middle-class New York City residents were presented with a picture of a black businessman being robbed by a white laborer. But, such a picture didn't square with the prejudices of the viewers. To them, white men were executives; black men were blue collar workers. Blacks were the robbers, whites the victims. And so they reported what their mind told them they saw--that a black laborer was assaulting a white businessman. As human beings who desperately desire our lives to be consistent and untroubled, we'll go to great lengths to reject a message that implies we're wrong.

When our focus is on justifying ourselves, we run into problems. A good relationship with Christ starts with our admitting that we are not as good as we often think. We always have room to grow in our relationship with Christ and with other people. With a focus on Christ at the centre, we can humbly learn to listen much better. There is always more we can learn, even if we think we know all we need about something.

I think Sanae san is the one who introduced the following photo to some of us.

<shoe photo>

The question is, what colour is this shoe? Some insist that it is pink with white laces, while others see a grey shoe with green laces. What do you see? Scientists say that what we see is influenced by what we expect to see, as well as our experience. We don't all see everything in the same way. Just as people are different and unique on the outside, they are also unique on the inside in how they think.

We are all different. We've been raised in different cultures, with different world-views and experiences. What is natural for one may be completely strange for another person. Our knowledge and experience helps us understand much, but we must remember that our understanding is always a

limited understanding. Our deepest beliefs are sometimes incorrect. Our faith, is not just based on knowing the right things, even though correct knowledge is important. Our faith needs to be based on more than just knowledge. Our knowledge will change as we grow in understanding. And, of course, we'll never know everything about God, the Bible, and the mysteries of the universe. Our emotions and our sense of God's presence must also be part of our faith. We are tempted to want certainty in everything, but God calls us to a relationship with Jesus Christ. The focus is on trust rather than on correct knowledge. God doesn't call us to a set of rules to follow. Today's scripture passage starts with a key statement that grounds our faith. "For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God – not the result of works, so that no may boast." (v.8-9) The most important thing is not how much we know. It's whom we know, and whether or not we trust him.

The Apostle Paul talks about how two very different groups of people, Jews and Gentiles (non-Jews) are united through Jesus Christ. The Jews were "God's chosen people". The only way for Gentiles to be a part of God's kingdom was for them to become Jews. The Jewish sign of circumcision was made in order to symbolize those who were a part of God's kingdom. Although the Gentiles were not part of God's chosen group, and were without hope, it's significant that Paul says the Jewish sign of circumcision was made "in the flesh" by human hands. In the Bible, the phrase "in the flesh" usually carries a negative meaning. It was opposite to being "in the Spirit of God." So, both the Jews and Gentiles were equally in need of Jesus Christ. The Jews relied on their laws, but through Jesus Christ, the laws were now "written on everyone's hearts." It's interesting to note that it was "in his flesh" that Jesus broke down the walls. Through his physical sacrifice on the cross, Jesus died, and was later raised to life. Both Jews and Gentiles now needed to learn to trust in God's leading.

Jesus destroyed the hostility between God and all people, as well as between the Jews and Gentiles. Jesus came to make peace between us and God. The result is that we also then grow in having peace in our relationships with each other. If we have a problem in our relationship with another person, it often is a sign that we have a problem in our relationship with God that needs work. As we look to following Jesus, we gain strength and are able to accept people who are different from us. Because "Christ is our peace," we may lose peace when we lose sight of Christ in our lives. We need to keep him at the centre. Paul is clear about where our focus needs to be.

In our Ephesians passage, he writes using a chiasmic structure. This technique uses repetition to emphasise important points. You can find this style of writing all through the Bible. Here Paul has an ABCBA chiasmic structure. In his commentary on Ephesians, Tom Yoder Neufeld shows it this way:

<**Structure Outline**>

Verses 11-12 emphasise how people were strangers and aliens without God.

Verse 13 emphasises how Christ has brought near the people who were far away.

Verse 14-16 emphasises the theme that Christ is our peace.

Verse 17-18 emphasises how Christ proclaimed peace to those who were far and near.

And finally, verses 19-22 emphasise how we are no longer strangers, but part of God's home.

Notice how the first and last "A sections" are similar, and the 2nd and 4th "B sections." One of the things that chiasms help us with is to see the main point, which is usually at the centre. In this case, it is the "C section." "Christ is our peace." Paul wants to make sure we see that it is Jesus Christ who is at the centre of everything. Jesus is the one who broke down the walls

between us and God, and he continues to break walls that are between people caused by our sin.

So, where have we experienced tensions with someone over differences? The wall of sin between humanity and God has been taken care of, and Christ continues in the business of tearing down walls and tensions that separate people. And, it's often through our prayers that God is able to work. Let's pray now.

O Lord, we praise you as the "Prince of Peace." Thank-you for the way in which you bring together so many different people in your church. Thank-you that you don't just ask us to make peace in our

relationships, but you also give us the strength and wisdom to grow as peacemakers. O God, thank-you that we belong to your family through your Son, Jesus. Thank-you that the most important thing is not that we have all the correct knowledge, but that we learn to trust in you. We pray that you would continue to unite us as a church, especially as we look to the future and think of the vision you have for us. Help us to not get caught up in the differences we may find among us. Instead, may we focus on Christ, and his way of love, Amen.