

From Hostility to Unity in Christ

Ephesians 2:11-22.

(Dr. Stephen Pietsch, July 2021)

Hostility in the church. Really? Oh yes.

It's a strong word, isn't it? Even shocking.

It means the kind of hatred people have for their mortal enemies, the kind of hatred that causes wars. But that is what is behind this text, and Paul uses this word very deliberately here, as he speaks to this congregation in Ephesus about their hostility, which was a really serious problem, so serious that it threatened the congregation's unity and even its very existence; deeper and more serious than any hostility and division we are facing in our church today.

This hostility was between members of the church who Jewish, on the one hand, and Gentiles (non-Jews) on the other hand; Christians *in the same congregation* who despised one another. In fact one of the things we know about the church in the apostolic era generally is that this hostility between Jew and Gentile was a problem in many places. And it ran deep: it was ethnic (about race), cultural and religious. Some Jewish Christians did not think Gentiles should even be in the Christian church at all – that they were alien outsiders, spiritually profane and tainted interlopers from the pagan religious world, who had no place in the household of God. Coming from outside Israel, these people had no legitimacy before God. Paul talks about this in verses 11-13: as non-Jews they had no covenant with God. They were the uncircumcised – aliens, strangers, nobodies, they had no claim on God's promises to Israel and so they had no future, no hope.

The ill-feeling was on both sides. The Gentiles felt humiliated and ill-treated. The rejection they felt from the Jewish Christians made them question their own faith and salvation; Paul is in fact addressing this very problem in this text, as we will see. Inevitably this division over ethnicity and religious purity and identity, tipped over (as we know from reading Acts and Paul's other letters) into differences and disagreements of spiritual teaching and practice which were serious and divisive, like the question of whether Christians needed to be circumcised in order to be truly in God's church, and what kinds of food regulations should apply to Christians (specifically whether Christians can eat food that has been offered to idols).

And here in this text Paul is tackling this hostility head on. And to his readers in Ephesus what he says here would have been radical and very challenging. This letter would have been read aloud in the presence of the whole congregation, Jews and Gentiles. The approach he takes here is very interesting. His words are addressed, apparently, to the Gentiles, but as he speaks to them here, he knows that the Jewish Christians are hearing this too – and they are meant to. Just listen what Paul says in verses 13-19:

But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ. For he himself is our peace, who has made us both one and has broken down in his flesh the dividing wall of hostility by abolishing the law of commandments expressed in ordinances, that he might create in himself one new humanity¹ in place of the two, so making peace, and might reconcile us both to God in one body through the cross, thereby killing the hostility. And he came and preached peace to you who were far off and peace to those who were near. For through him we both have access in one Spirit to the Father. So then you are no

¹ Paul uses the semitic idiom 'man' to stand for humanity or human beings in general.

longer strangers and aliens, but you are fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God...

What Paul is doing here is using all the Jewish religious language and images that had been turned against the Gentiles, to describe how the Gentiles are now, *received into the family and household of God as full and legitimate members*, through Jesus Christ who gave his flesh, his blood his body on the cross (notes the sacrificial covenant language) in order to break down the 'dividing wall of hostility' - another image well known to any Jew who had been to the temple in Jerusalem: there was a high wall separating the inner court of the Jews from the outer court of the temple where Gentiles were allowed. Any Gentile who tried to go into the inner court was arrested, as Paul himself was, in fact, in Acts 21, as a traitor to Judaism.

But, Paul says, this dividing wall has now been smashed down, by Christ. Now Jews and Gentiles are together, one body, one new humanity (v15), with one shared identity and status – not Jewish, not Gentile, something new – Christ's beloved people, saved not by keeping the law's commands, but by Christ's redeeming sacrifice, reconciled to God the Father, *and so also to one another*.

Paul is speaking into this volatile situation by showing that no matter how different, how divided and how hostile these two groups felt towards one another, Christ had already made peace between them. 'He himself is our peace' he says in verse 14. In verse 16, Paul says something very dramatic: that the hostility between Jew and Gentile in the church has itself been killed through Jesus' death on the cross; our hostility has been crucified with Christ. The cross is where he gave his body to make one new living body, his holy church.

This oneness which Christ has created is not some kind of aspirational vision; it is a reality that has already happened. Christ's church is one; all who are in Christ are one in Christ. But it is also important to say that this oneness of Christ's church does not simply cancel out or wallpaper over the problems and disagreements about race or spiritual teaching. The big issues in the church in the time of the apostles, circumcision, food offered to idols (others too) also had to be worked out, and over time, they were, sometime through very robust debate, but in a spirit of patience and love, not in a spirit of hostility.

We today do not have a deep ethnic-cultural-religious divide in the church quite like this Jewish-Gentile hostility in Ephesus, but the church, made up as it is of sinner-saints, has always had to cope with tensions and even divisions, just as our church today does. We still do a pretty good job of being enemies sometimes. There is suspicion, hostility even, and this is a sin; In Galatians 5:20 Paul identifies hostility as one of the deadly works of the flesh. When we allow it to grow, we sin against one another, against the one body for which Christ gave up his body in death. I must admit that working on this text has led me to see this sin at work in my own life at times; and I invite you to reflect here on your own conscience.

Hostility, in the church? Oh yes. There are disagreements where people are tempted to form camps and build dividing walls: over big and small things – from how the church should order its constitution or the office of the ministry to whether the new toilet block should face the east or the west. Paul's teaching here does not mean that these will just go away or should be ignored. His teaching points us to the right starting point, the right attitude which we need as we work on them, to the new reality of our oneness in Christ which 'kills our hostility', and allows us to listen to one another, receive one another and discern the right way together, as 'fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God' (v 19).

This oneness which Jesus has created through his own flesh and blood is not just something that restrains us or contains our hostility: it is a powerful spiritual force at work in us, through our

baptism in to the one holy church, as we receive the proclaimed word of the Gospel and partake of the one body and drink of the one cup in the Lord's Supper. The Spirit creates his fruits in and among us: love, gentleness, humility, patience. It gives us the very tools we need to work through our tensions and divisions.

As in all the church's history, there will be some very robust and difficult conversations! There may even be some differences that we find we cannot be overcome. But there is only one place to start: Jesus Christ who has already, through his blood, reconciled us to God the Father and one another. Jesus Christ, the cornerstone of the Christian church, because there can be no other foundation for building unity. He is the living word of God who speaks to us in Scripture, the foundation of the apostles and prophets. Jesus Christ who has brought us into unity with the Father, through the forgiveness of our sins, into God's gracious household, our true home, here and now and in God's eternal kingdom.