

THE SOVEREIGN GOD AND
THE MYSTERY OF HIS WILL:
A STUDY OF EPHESIANS

(LESSON TWENTY-FOUR)

“CAN THESE TWO BECOME ONE?”

EPHESIANS 2:8-22 (NEW ENGLISH TRANSLATION)

8 For by grace you are saved through faith, and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God;

9 it is not from works, so that no one can boast.

10 For we are his creative work, having been created in Christ Jesus for good works that God prepared beforehand so we can do them.

11 Therefore remember that formerly you, the Gentiles in the flesh — who are called “uncircumcision” by the so-called “circumcision” that is performed on the body by human hands —

12 that you were at that time without the Messiah, alienated from the citizenship of Israel and strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world.

13 But now in Christ Jesus you who used to be far away have been brought near by the blood of Christ.

14 For he is our peace, the one who made both groups into one and who destroyed the middle wall of partition, the hostility,

15 when he nullified in his flesh the law of commandments in decrees. He did this to create in himself one new man out of two, thus making peace,

16 and to reconcile them both in one body to God through the cross, by which the hostility has been killed.

17 And he came and preached peace to you who were far off and peace to those who were near,

18 so that through him we both have access in one Spirit to the Father.

19 So then you are no longer foreigners and noncitizens, but you are fellow citizens with the saints and members of God’s household,

20 because you have been built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the cornerstone.

21 In him the whole building, being joined together, grows into a holy temple in the Lord,

22 in whom you also are being built together into a dwelling place of God in the Spirit.

In the first half of **Ephesians 2** (verses **1-10**), Paul addressed the matter of the salvation of sinners in general. In the second half of the chapter (verses **11-22**), he focuses his attention on the work of Christ for the Gentiles in particular, and on the reconciliation of Gentiles and Jews in their union with Christ. As we read these latter verses, we must bear in mind the fact that the majority of the converts in the Ephesian church were Gentiles.

Earlier in his letter, in chapter **one** verses **twelve** and **thirteen**, Paul had advised the Ephesians that an important aspect of the mysterious will of God, was the uniting of the Jews and the Gentiles into one body — the Church. He wrote, *“God’s purpose was that we Jews who were the first to trust in Christ would bring praise and glory to God. And now you Gentiles have also heard the truth, the Good News that God saves you. And when you believed in Christ, he identified you as his own by giving you the Holy Spirit, whom he promised long ago.”*

Paul focused attention on the fact that in the purpose and plan of God, both Jews and Gentiles have been brought together and have been made one in Christ.

This might not appear to be very significant to those of us who are living in the twenty-first century, but to persons who were living in the first century, it was an astonishing phenomenon.

William Barclay, the Scottish theologian, in one of his writings, gives us an insight into the alarming level of hostility that existed between the Jews and the Gentiles in the first century. He writes, and I quote, *“The Gentiles were called the uncircumcision by those who laid claim to that circumcision which is a physical and man-made thing. This was the first of the great divisions. The Jew had an immense contempt for the Gentile. They said that the Gentiles were created by God to be fuel for the fires of Hell; that God loved only Israel of all the nations that he had made.... It was not even lawful to render help to a Gentile woman in childbirth, for that would be to bring another Gentile into the world. The barrier between Jew and Gentile was absolute. If a Jew married a Gentile, the funeral of that Jew was carried out. Such contact with a Gentile was the equivalent of death; even to go into a Gentile house rendered a Jew unclean.”*

The entire compound of the Temple at Jerusalem was considered holy, but it became increasingly more holy as one entered farther in, from east to west. The outer court was enclosed with colonnades and was referred to as the Court of the Gentiles because the Gentiles were permitted to walk within it. But they were forbidden to go any further than the outer court. They were excluded from entering into any of the inner courts, and warning signs in Greek and Latin were erected that warned the Gentiles that the penalty for such trespass was death. The Romans permitted the Jewish authorities to carry out the death penalty for this offence, even if the offender were a Roman citizen.

Paul knew by personal experience how difficult it was to unite the Jews and the Gentiles into an organic unity, and a unity of perfect equality. The Jewish Christians found it difficult to accept Gentiles into the church unless they agreed to be circumcised and observe the Mosaic Law. In **Acts 15:1**, we are informed that immediately after he and Barnabas returned to Antioch from their missionary journey, “*some men came down from Judea and began to teach the brothers, ‘Unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved.’*” We will read verses **2-31**, in order to inform ourselves of the details relative to this controversial issue and the attempt that was made to deal with it:

2 *When Paul and Barnabas had a major argument and debate with them, the church appointed Paul and Barnabas and some others from among them to go up to meet with the apostles and elders in Jerusalem about this point of disagreement.*

3 *So they were sent on their way by the church, and as they passed through both Phoenicia and Samaria, they were relating at length the conversion of the Gentiles and bringing great joy to all the brothers.*

4 *When they arrived in Jerusalem, they were received by the church and the apostles and the elders, and they reported all the things God had done with them.*

5 *But some from the religious party of the Pharisees who had believed stood up and said, “It is necessary to circumcise the Gentiles and to order them to observe the law of Moses.”*

6 *Both the apostles and the elders met together to deliberate about this matter.*

7 *After there had been much debate, Peter stood up and said to them, “Brothers, you know that some time ago God chose me to preach to the Gentiles so they would hear the message of the gospel and believe.*

8 *And God, who knows the heart, has testified to them by giving them the Holy Spirit just as he did to us,*

9 *and he made no distinction between them and us, cleansing their hearts by faith.*

10 *So now why are you putting God to the test by placing on the neck of the disciples a yoke that neither our ancestors nor we have been able to bear?*

11 *On the contrary, we believe that we are saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus, in the same way as they are.”*

12 *The whole group kept quiet and listened to Barnabas and Paul while they explained all the miraculous signs and wonders God had done among the Gentiles through them.*

13 *After they stopped speaking, James replied, “Brothers, listen to me.*

14 *Simeon has explained how God first concerned himself to select from among the Gentiles a people for his name.*

15 *The words of the prophets agree with this, as it is written,*

16 *'After this I will return, and I will rebuild the fallen tent of David; I will rebuild its ruins and restore it,*

17 *so that the rest of humanity may seek the Lord, namely, all the Gentiles I have called to be my own,' says the Lord, who makes these things*

18 *known from long ago.*

19 *"Therefore I conclude that we should not cause extra difficulty for those among the Gentiles who are turning to God,*

20 *but that we should write them a letter telling them to abstain from things defiled by idols and from sexual immorality and from what has been strangled and from blood.*

21 *For Moses has had those who proclaim him in every town from ancient times, because he is read aloud in the synagogues every Sabbath."*

22 *Then the apostles and elders, with the whole church, decided to send men chosen from among them, Judas called Barsabbas and Silas, leaders among the brothers, to Antioch with Paul and Barnabas.*

23 *They sent this letter with them: From the apostles and elders, your brothers, to the Gentile brothers and sisters in Antioch, Syria, and Cilicia, greetings!*

24 *Since we have heard that some have gone out from among us with no orders from us and have confused you, upsetting your minds by what they said,*

25 *we have unanimously decided to choose men to send to you along with our dear friends Barnabas and Paul,*

26 *who have risked their lives for the name of our Lord Jesus Christ.*

27 *Therefore we are sending Judas and Silas who will tell you these things themselves in person.*

28 *For it seemed best to the Holy Spirit and to us not to place any greater burden on you than these necessary rules:*

29 *that you abstain from meat that has been sacrificed to idols and from blood and from what has been strangled and from sexual immorality. If you keep yourselves from doing these things, you will do well. Farewell.*

30 *So when they were dismissed, they went down to Antioch, and after gathering the entire group together, they delivered the letter.*

31 *When they read it aloud, the people rejoiced at its encouragement.*

If Paul had considered that the issue had been settled conclusively, he was sadly mistaken. In **Galatians 2:11-21**, he gives us an account of a serious breach of the spirit of the letter that had been written by the apostles and elders and sent to the Gentile churches:

11 *But when Cephas came to Antioch, I opposed him to his face, because he had clearly done wrong.*

12 *Until certain people came from James, he had been eating with the Gentiles. But when they arrived, he stopped doing this and separated himself because he was afraid of those who were pro-circumcision.*

13 *And the rest of the Jews also joined with him in this hypocrisy, so that even Barnabas was led astray with them by their hypocrisy.*

14 *But when I saw that they were not behaving consistently with the truth of the gospel, I said to Cephas in front of them all, "If you, although you are a Jew, live like a Gentile and not like a Jew, how can you try to force the Gentiles to live like Jews?"*

15 *We are Jews by birth and not Gentile sinners,*

16 *yet we know that no one is justified by the works of the law but by the faithfulness of Jesus Christ. And we have come to believe in Christ Jesus, so that we may be justified by the faithfulness of Christ and not by the works of the law, because by the works of the law no one will be justified.*

17 *But if while seeking to be justified in Christ we ourselves have also been found to be sinners, is Christ then one who encourages sin? Absolutely not!*

18 *But if I build up again those things I once destroyed, I demonstrate that I am one who breaks God's law.*

19 *For through the law I died to the law so that I may live to God.*

20 *I have been crucified with Christ, and it is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me. So the life I now live in the body, I live because of the faithfulness of the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me.*

21 *I do not set aside God's grace, because if righteousness could come through the law, then Christ died for nothing!*

Brothers and sisters, old habits die hard. The epistles to the **Romans** and to the **Corinthians** clearly indicate that the battle had not yet been completely won even when they were written. In fact, it had not been completely won up to the time of Paul's death.

In light of all this, we may wonder whether or not God seriously expected the Jews and the Gentiles to have effective fellowship with each other in the local church. The answer is that He did. In fact, as far as God was concerned, the unity was already a reality. Both groups had the responsibility, as transformed people, to live out that reality. In our next **Lesson**, we will examine the latter half of **Ephesians 2** (verses **11-22**), to see Paul's instructions, primarily to the Gentile believers, as to how this was to be done.