

**Peace in the Household**  
**Ephesians 2:111-22**  
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Two weeks ago, Fulani Muslims killed 500 Christians in villages around Jos, Nigeria. Tensions between Christians and Muslims in that region of the world have flared numerous times over the years. In February of 2006, Christian militants massacred 80 people in Onitsha, Nigeria after weeks of religious rioting.

Sadly, one of the ways human beings continue to deal with their differences is by attempting to exterminate one another. In parts of Nigeria, Muslims attack Christians and Christians attack Muslims. In Palestine, Jews attack Muslims, Muslims attack Jews. In Pakistan and India, Hindus, Muslims and Christians perpetrate violence against one another. There are people of every religion who believe the only way to live at peace is to kill those who hold a different view of God.

Although we have our own failures, in this country we have decided that people of differing faiths ought to be able to coexist peacefully in spite of their differences. In our better moments, we pursue a strategy that includes respect for other faiths and protections for each person's right to follow the dictates of his or her conscience.

We apply the same model to the vast array of cultures that have taken root on our common patch of earth. A few blocks from this building resides the largest Salvadoran community in the Washington D.C. area. Their neighborhood features the cuisine, music, art, religion and language of their native culture. Although not as dominant as our neighbors from Central America, Vietnamese, Haitian, Chinese, Nigerian, Liberian, Jamaican and a dozen other cultures reside in our neighborhood as well. All of us who hale from very different places on earth have generally adopted a "live and let live" attitude toward one another. Most of the time, our tolerance of one another, if not genuine appreciation, is enough to provide some semblance of peace.

The apostle Paul is not concerned with this kind of peace in his letter to the church at Ephesus. He assumes that Jews, Romans, Greeks, Egyptians and the myriad of other cultures represented throughout the Mediterranean world can find a way to peaceably coexist. Although religious and cultural persecution was occurring toward Jews, Christians and other ethnic and religious minorities, Paul was not primarily focused on establishing greater tolerance of and protection for people of differing faiths.

Instead, the brilliant apostle was focused on a breathtaking idea, a new idea, never before contemplated on earth. He believed that through faith in Jesus Christ, Jews and Gentiles, Romans, Greeks, Egyptians, Syrians, Ethiopians and people from every culture on the planet, could become what he called a new humanity.

This vision represented a radical departure from the way Paul was raised. He grew up believing that there were two categories of people in the world, Jews and everyone else. Jews were people who had entered into a covenant with God. God promised to love them, provide for them, bless them, use them in holy service and grant them security forever. In return, the Jewish people promised to obey the commands of the Lord as revealed through the Law of Moses. Circumcision was adopted as a sign of this eternal covenant.

Non-Jews, people who had not been circumcised and did not follow the Law of Moses were seen by the Jewish faithful as people without God. Even though they claimed to worship tribal and imperial deities, the Jews labeled them pagan or godless.

The Jews acknowledged this separation in the construction of their temple. A wall was built between the court for Jewish men and the court for Jewish women. Another wall was erected between the court for Jewish women and the court for Gentiles or non-Jews. On that wall read the following warning, "No man of another race is to enter within the fence and enclosure around the temple."

For most of his life, therefore, Paul saw the world as rigidly divided between people in covenant with God, the circumcised and those who were not given that option, the uncircumcised. If a non-Jew wanted to enter the covenant with God, Paul believed that he or she would need to convert to Judaism. The men would have to be circumcised and both men and women would have to practice the Law of Moses. In other words, the only way to come into covenant with God, according to Jewish teaching, was to become a Jew in the religious sense of that word.

Paul adhered to this teaching until he was converted to Christianity and began preaching the good news of Jesus Christ throughout the Mediterranean world. Unlike the apostles before him, Paul preached to both Jews and Gentiles, the circumcised and uncircumcised and people from both broad categories responded with repentance and faith in Jesus. Southern Baptist scholar Frank Staggs in his brilliant commentary on Acts does a superior job of documenting the other apostles' resistance to preaching the gospel to Gentiles. They believed that Jesus had come to reform Judaism, not open the kingdom of God to who they considered to be pagans. The conversion of both Jews and Gentiles presented Paul with a problem. Would God have him require the Gentile believers to first adopt circumcision and the Law of Moses before they could be accepted into God's eternal covenant of love, provision, blessing, holy service and security? Would Roman, Greek, Ethiopian and Egyptian followers of Christ all have to become Jewish before they could please God?

Or was Paul to establish separate churches for the people of every culture who experienced conversion? Did God intend for there to be a Jewish church in which the circumcised gathered on the Sabbath to worship God through the reading of the Torah, the prayers for the safety of Jerusalem, the singing of Psalms, the proclamation of the prophets of Hebrew Scriptures and the celebration of Christ's resurrection from the grave? Elsewhere in the city was there to be a Roman church, where the uncircumcised gathered on Sunday to eat pork, toast the health of the Emperor and sing new songs of the victory of Christ, the son of God? And across town was there to be an Egyptian congregation that gathered on Friday to devour non-kosher meals of fish and leavened bread, tell the legends of the Pharaohs, study the teachings of the apostles and pray the Lord's prayer?

This alternative must have seemed appealing. Otherwise, what hope was there for the new believers to get along? After all, they had hated each other for centuries. What Roman, regardless of his love for Christ, would undergo circumcision? What Egyptian, despite her devotion to Jesus, would adopt Jewish dietary laws? What Jew would truly accept anybody from any culture that ignored the Law of Moses?

To his astonishment, however, Paul soon learned that God neither wanted all believers to become Jewish nor for every culture to worship separately. Instead, the Lord wanted to create a new humanity of diverse people who had found true communion with God and each other through discipleship to Jesus Christ. The church leaders of the first century actually had the gall to call this new humanity a third race, neither Jew nor Gentile, but Christian. Please hear the word of the Lord, this vision was not one in which diverse people coexisted through mutual respect and careful separation. This vision was one where people of radically different cultures became brothers and sisters, one communion, bound by the love of Christ.

According to Paul, God's new humanity would require a new sanctuary. No place of worship, the apostle said, should have separate courts for Gentiles, or for that matter, for men and women. In God's new humanity, everyone was to worship in the same sanctuary.

Secondly, Paul announced that the God's new humanity required a new covenant. Instead of physical circumcision sealing the covenant with God, the new humanity would undergo a circumcision of the heart which would be publicly demonstrated through baptism for those who confessed Jesus Christ as Lord. Dietary laws, Sabbath regulations and other uniquely Jewish traditions were to be abolished from the Christian Church.

Thirdly, Paul explained that God's new humanity required a new holy book. Rather than include the Levitical code, Paul declared that the inspired preaching of the Jewish prophets, the teachings of the apostles and the message of Jesus Christ would become the Scripture for the church. Martin Luther said the church was to be guided by what he called Sola Scriptura. When asked if that meant that the entire Old Testament was authoritative over the church, he replied "the Scripture that points people to Jesus is." Luther believed that parts of holiness code of the Hebrew Scriptures, for instance, had no bearing on the Christian life. Paul would agree. Anything that would require a Roman, Egyptian or Kansan to first become Jewish in order to be welcomed in the community of Christ was to be ignored. The incredible visions of Isaiah, Jeremiah and Micah as well as the gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke and John and the teaching of Jesus were to be authoritative for the church.

In addition Paul stated that the new humanity would require a new community. He called this new community, the household of God. Rather than build a church around a common allegiance to a cultural tradition, Paul said, the church is to be built upon allegiance to Jesus Christ, the one who gave his life to save the entire world. Everyone who takes Jesus as Lord, is reconciled to God and one another. They become one community.

Every disciple of Christ, Paul proclaimed, becomes a full member of the household of God. The term household includes everyone who resides together whether they share the same family of origin or not. People of different nationalities and cultures can be in the same household. Paul said there are no second class citizens or visitors or strangers, everyone who is devoted to Christ belongs in the household of God with all rights and privileges.

Lastly Paul said the new humanity requires a new temple, one without walls or divisions or gradations of superiority. Instead, the people who love Jesus become the temple, the place where the Holy Spirit of God is housed, the place where God dwells and keeps covenant with those who believe.

Pam Larsen is the mother of nine children, four biological and five adopted from Vietnam, El Salvador, Cambodia and inner-city adoption agencies. When asked which children are her "real" kids, she says, "they all are." Pam says that their family is far from perfect. "We've had kids everywhere from Yale to jail, but I wouldn't trade our experience for any other family's." Pam's eight-year old daughter came home recently from visiting the three red headed children living next door and said, "Mom, that is the strangest family I've ever seen, they all look alike."

I confess a similar response these days when I visit churches where everybody is of the same race. There is no reason for us to disparage people who believe every culture should have their own church or house of worship. We can respectfully coexist with all of them and work to make sure the country provides all of us with the freedom to worship as our convictions dictate. At the same time, we can also celebrate our participation in the divine plan of God espoused by the apostle Paul. A plan that can bring ancient enemies and people of vastly different cultures together in a new humanity created by the death, burial and resurrection of Jesus Christ.