

Proper 11YB2024
Ephesians

The Messy Road to Unity

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At our last Agape Circle, we ate in two rooms, the library and the Resource room, in the administrative building because it had air conditioning. The activity that evening was to tell our “American” stories for Fourth of July by telling our non-US origin stories. As it turned out, all the Asians ended up in the Resource room because they had arrived last and the library seats were already filled. The irony was not lost on me, and I literally “crossed the aisle” between the library and the Resource room to declare that it was not “Agape Circle” anymore, but “Apartheid Circle.” I thought it was funny, but someone said, “Oh, I don’t like that.” Yes, separation in the church is not what we desire. But, unity is not so easily achieved.

The letter called Ephesians is a general epistle to the church at large, perhaps written close to the end of the first century. It seems that over the course of time, there grew a serious separation between the Gentile and Jewish followers of Jesus. They don’t seem to behave like they belong to each other and to the one body of Christ. The author is writing to help the church recall its unity by recalling what Christ did through the cross, which was to break down the “dividing wall of hostility”. This dividing wall is likely a reference to the destroyed temple, which had a court for the gentiles that was walled off from the Jews. The gentiles might worship the God of Israel, but they could not pass the wall unless they were circumcised. This rule of circumcision is the “law” that was abolished in Christ. (Note, it was not the entire Torah that was dismissed.) Having dismantled the “dividing wall of hostility”, Christ proclaimed peace to those who were near (the Jews or the “Circumcision”) and those who were far (the Gentiles or the “Uncircumcision”). In fact, the bricks of the tumbled wall of hostility have been reused to make a new belonging called the household of God, with Christ as the chief cornerstone. (You gotta love a consistent metaphor.)

It's a beautiful metaphor and lofty vision of unity in the church, something to strive for. But, there's no question that striving for such unity is much messier than the cosmic vision might indicate. How does the sausage get made? The vision of a new people—beyond nation, culture, sex, class—was the first thing the nascent church worked for after the death and resurrection of Jesus. It is all over the book of Acts and the early letters of Paul. And yet, here at the end of the second century, we have a collection of churches that do not feel they belong to each other and to the body of Christ. Ephesians doesn't tell us why, but I have a theory.

My theory is that it is hard to be community because people are complicated, and we bring into community-making our personal and cultural baggage and our unconscious biases. It is hard because we prefer the cleaner version of ourselves rather than to take an honest appraisal of how we operate and doing the deep repentance work that moves us from what is not of Christ to what is of Christ.

We can get a good sense of how this works when we compare the Book of Acts with the letters of Paul around the formation of the very early church. If you read Acts, you'd think that the 12 apostles and Paul were so converted by the Holy Spirit that they readily agreed with each other and were of one mind. Peter who denied Jesus suddenly was full of confidence and preaches and many convert as a result. He was also full of strength when convinced by the vision of the carpet of animals and the speaking of tongues at Cornelius' home. His report to the Jerusalem church was instantly concluded with awe, "So, the gospel has even been given to the Gentiles." And with an abundance of grace, Paul convinced them to not make it so hard for the Gentiles to require them to be circumcised and abide by kosher eating. It all worked out so well.

But, if you read the letters of Paul, particularly the Letter to the Galatians, you see things in reality were much harder. In the letter, Paul was beside himself with rage. The church in Galatia was a mixture of Gentile and Jew, sharing the same eating practices. But when a group from Jerusalem came to his church in Galatia representing the "Circumcision" faction, the church became divided along Jew and

Gentile. This Circumcision faction thought the gentiles should both observe circumcision and kosher eating in order to belong to Christ. Peter, who was already with Paul, prior to the Circumcision faction coming, was doing as the Gentiles did. He was not eating kosher. But after the visit from the Jerusalem delegation, he became kosher again and, along with the Jews of the Galatian church, separated himself from the gentiles. Paul lambasted Peter in the midst of the whole congregation, calling him a hypocrite.

It was really messy. There might have been lofty aspirations, but the reality was that it was hard to put aside the deeply held cultural convictions and conditioning. In fact, without truly revising the cultural convictions, the division caused by them was transmitted on and on—until we hit the situation in Ephesians, where the two groups, the Circumcision and the Uncircumcision, looked at each as aliens to each other.

We can sing, “In Christ there is no East of West,” as much as we want, but if we really want a church like this, we have to do clear-eyed self-examination of those things conscious and unconscious that are always trying to rebuild the “dividing wall of hostility.” In our day, we are blessed with a lot of deep and profound study on what creates hierarchies in our minds. Race, class, gender, to name a few. It’s not just about what we consciously think, but what unconsciously drives us without our say-so or know-so. I believe that unless we do the hard work of self-examination as a body and not just as individuals, we will never achieve the lofty vision of unity. We will just keep inserting our biases which separate.

But isn’t this kind hard work the crux of the gospel? The gospel’s message is not, “We’re all good people here.” Rather, the gospel’s message is that we are all given the opportunity to repent, to change, to revise our view of the world and one another, not according to our gaze, but with the gaze of God. Imagine what sort of proclamation we can preach by our own work of repentance as a church. Imagine if the message isn’t, “I’m good and I go to church,” but, “I’m broken, and there is hope of healing the entire body through self-examination, truth-telling, and finally

conversion. And then I do it all over again. This is where my faith, hope, and love meet the road.”

Life together is messy, but it is full of blessings. It is not only where we support one another in times of need or celebrate with each other in times of joy. It is like a gym where we exercise our muscles of courage to tell the truth about ourselves to ourselves with each other for the sake of the body, and so gain our thorough conversion, and so gain our own souls. And so experience that lofty unity to which we strive.