

Ephesians

An encyclical letter from the heart of CHRIST
through the heart of Paul to the heart of the Church of all time

by

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CHAPTER FIVE

A SPIRITUAL TRAGEDY AND CHRIST

IN THE SECTION of the Epistle which commences with 2:11, the Apostle reminds those who were to read the Epistle that hitherto they had been outside the pale of religious privilege. They had been aliens from the commonwealth of Israel and strangers from the covenants of promise; they had been in the world without hope and without GOD.

Looked at from a certain point of view, this Epistle was perhaps the most radical religious writing of its time.

It is impossible for us to appreciate the impression which it would produce upon the minds of those to whom it was addressed unless we take into consideration the religious condition of the world of that day. Hitherto the race had been divided into two sections - two groups: one of these had been very large and one of them very small. And there had been an almost impassable barrier between them.

The Gentiles were on one side of this barrier; the Jews were on the other. The Jews had been for century after century the people of privilege. In one place, it will be recalled, the Apostle asks the question: "**What advantage then hath the Jew?**" And this is his answer: "**Much every way: chiefly, because that unto them were committed the oracles of God**" (Romans 3:1-2). They were the people of revelation.

In another place in the same Epistle he expands the thought. "**Who are Israelites; to whom pertaineth the adoption, and the glory, and the covenants, and the giving of the law, and the service of GOD, and the promises; whose are the fathers, and of whom, as concerning the flesh, Christ came**" (Romans 9:4-5).

How had this situation in which the Gentile found himself outside the barrier come about? To what extent was it right and to what extent was it wrong?

From the early ages of the history of the world, the method of separation has been employed by GOD as a part of the program of redemption.

- In the person of Noah we have the separation of a man;
- In the persons of Abraham and his immediate descendants we have the separation of a family;
- In the children of Israel we have the separation of a nation.

And so the Israelitish nation came to be; and in "becoming" it found itself a marked off and separated people. It stood in a unique relation to the rest of mankind. What was that relationship intended to be?

Observe in the first place that in its initial stages, it was not an ideal relationship. And yet it was originated by GOD. Does GOD then originate that which is less than ideal? Let us go to CHRIST for an answer to that question.

We read of one occasion when the Pharisees came to him and asked him: "**Is it lawful for a man to put away his wife?**" (Mark 10:2). The question was an insincere one, and was put with a malicious intent. His interrogators probably thought that for once He could not appeal to Mosaic law without lowering the ethical standards to which He had committed Himself.

But He countered with "**What did Moses command you?**" The response was already on their tongues. "**Moses suffered to write a bill of divorcement and to put her away.**" JESUS replied, "**For the hardness of your heart he wrote you this precept, but from the beginning of the creation God made them male and female.**"

It was not ideal legislation, but it was the best that they were ready for.

This same principle and polity is followed also by human statesmen: we often accept legislation which is far from perfect because it is the best that the majority of the populace are ready for. And while a theocracy is a government under the immediate control of GOD, yet it is a government which has to take into account the human equation, and GOD had to meet men upon their own ground, and give the best that they were ready to administer and carry out.

We return then to the statement that the relation in which Israel had stood to the other nations of the world had not been an ideal relation. At the outset of their national career it was very largely a relation of protest. This was the inevitable consequence of the situation in which they found themselves in the midst of nations who were not only heathen, but whose very religion was of the most debasing character. And so we find Moses speaking to them in such ways as this: "**When the Lord thy God shall bring thee into the land whither thou goest to possess it, and hath cast out many nations before thee... and when the Lord thy God shall deliver them before thee... thou shalt make no covenant with them, nor shew mercy unto them... but thus shall ye deal with them: ye shall destroy their altars, and break down their images, and cut down their groves, and burn their graven images with fire**" (Deuteronomy 7:1, 2, 5).

And again, in giving them the "**statutes and judgments**" which they were to observe in the land, Moses admonishes them to "**hew down the graven images . . . and destroy the names of them out of that place**" (Deuteronomy 12:3).

And that very protest was to mean salvation for them as well as admonishment for the world.

But it was not the divine intention that their relationship to the outside world should be eventually and exclusively one of protest.

What then was their attitude to the "**stranger**" to be? The foreigner who dwelt with them or among whom they dwelt? Turn again to the Pentateuch. "**Thou shalt neither vex a stranger, nor oppress him: for ye were strangers in the land of Egypt**" (Exodus 22:21).

And again: "**Love ye therefore the stranger: for ye were strangers in the land of Egypt**" (Deuteronomy 10:19).

And again: "**Gather the people together, men, and women, and children, and thy stranger that is within thy gates, that they may hear, and that they may learn, and fear the Lord your God**" (Deuteronomy 31:12).

They were not to "**vex**" them; they were to "**love**" them; they were to gather them together and teach them.

And what was their mission to be to the outside world? It was a development, but in a word it was the inverse of their privilege. Remember that it was to a little group of Jews that CHRIST uttered those words which are recorded in Matthew 5: "**Ye are the salt of the earth . . . Ye are the light of the world . . . Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father which is in heaven.**" That, then, was the ideal relationship between Israel and the outside world - "**salt**" and "**light.**"

But how different from that had their spiritual history been! They had become narrow and exclusive and selfish: they were bigoted and intolerant. And so the Apostle describes the Gentiles as to their relationship with the Jews in the terms of spiritual tragedy. They were "**aliens,**" "**strangers,**" "**having no hope,**" "**without God**" - outside the barrier.

When Paul spoke of a middle wall of partition, it meant much more to him than a mere figure of speech: he was thinking of a literal wall.

We must remember the construction of the Temple of that day to appreciate this. The area of Herod's Temple was very large; but it was only the outside fringe of this area that Gentiles were permitted to enter. The Temple buildings consisted of court within court, and there were varying degrees of sanctity and exclusiveness in these sacred places. The Holy of Holies was entered through the Holy Place. In front of the Holy Place was the Court of the Priests, with the altar of burnt offering. To the east of that was the Court of the Sons of Israel, which is said to have been approached through the Court of the Women.

And then beyond and about these courts, which were on descending levels, on a lower one and approached by descending steps, there was the Court of the Gentiles. And around the inside wall of the Court of the Gentiles was a low stone barrier about five feet in height on which at equal distances, notices were inscribed, warning Gentiles not to pass beyond the barrier on pain of death. The excavations of the Palestine Exploration Committee uncovered (in 1871) one of the very pillars on which those warnings were inscribed.

***NO MAN OF ANOTHER NATION TO ENTER
WITHIN THE FENCED ENCLOSURE AROUND THE TEMPLE,
AND WHOEVER IS CAUGHT WILL HAVE HIMSELF TO BLAME
THAT HIS DEATH ENSUES***

This then was the extent of the religious franchise, so to speak, of the Gentiles in the days when this Epistle was penned.

We know from the Gospel records, and from the testimony of historians, that these very meager privileges were invaded and trampled upon by the Jewish ecclesiastics.

In the days when CHRIST was exercising His ministry, the Court of the Gentiles was used as a place of traffic. Oxen and sheep were herded there and were traded in for sacrificial purposes, and the moneychangers carried on a lucrative practice in the exchange of the common currencies for the shekel of the Sanctuary, which was the coin in which the temple poll tax was paid. And let us remember that this was the only portion of the temple area to which Gentiles had access.

When the proselytes who had embraced the religion of Israel were treated with such slight consideration that their place in the Temple area was turned into a market place, it is not to be wondered at that there was enmity between the Gentile and the Jew. This is the word which the Apostle uses twice in this passage to describe the sentiment which prevailed. *

What did CHRIST do to break down this antagonism? Observe in passing that He protested against it. On three occasions, once at the beginning of His ministry and twice at its close, He took the situation into His own hands and cleared the Court of the Gentiles of the obnoxious intruders (John 2:13-16: Matthew 21:12-13: Mark 11:15-17). These were the only occasions on which He used physical force. And the words which He used as He did it disclose what was passing through His mind. It was to be a house of prayer for "all" nations; but even the limited rights and privileges of the Gentiles were being curtailed, invaded, and almost taken away.

* Some precepts of the Talmud throw light upon the way in which the Gentiles were regarded. "It is forbidden to give advice to a Gentile. It is forbidden to cure idolators, even for pay, except on account of fear. He that steals from a Gentile is only to pay the principal, for it is said: 'He shall pay double unto his neighbor.'"

But He did much more than protest against the abuses. He knew, as we ourselves also have discovered, that outward forms do not last very long. He probed to the root of the trouble, and then He threw Himself into the breach. It is that action of throwing Himself into the breach that the Apostle seeks to describe in this passage.

"But now in Christ Jesus ye who sometimes were far off are made nigh by the blood of Christ. For he is our peace, who hath made both one, and hath broken down the middle wall of partition between us; having abolished in his flesh the enmity, even the law of commandments contained in ordinances, for to make in himself of twain one new man, so making peace; and that he might reconcile both unto God in one body by the cross, having slain the enmity thereby (vv. 13-16).

The gaze of the Jew had been focused upon the Law. He had received it by the mediation of angels: he had been the custodian of it. It had been an enclosure which had fenced him in from the other peoples of the world. Now he had a new center of interest: his gaze was fixed upon CHRIST. And thus the occasion of "**enmity**" between Jew and Gentile was broken down in Him.

But notice the closing part of verse 15:

"For to make in himself of twain one new man, so making peace."

The Jew had much more than a new center of interest. He had found himself incorporated with the Gentile, by a vital spiritual union, into one body. The Jew and the Gentile had become "**one new man**"; and this was the imperturbable basis of peace. And so he says:

"And came and preached peace to you which were afar off, and to them that were nigh" (v. 17).

The verb here is suggestive: it says that He "**came**." From whence did He come, but from the open grave? And was not the first word which He said to the eleven after He rose from the dead, "**Peace be unto you**"? But His greeting comes to those also who were "**afar off**."

The prophet Isaiah had said this centuries before. "**Peace, peace, to him that is far off, and to him that is near**" (Isaiah 57:19). Surely the apostle had this in mind:

"For through him we both have access by one Spirit unto the Father" (v. 18).

We may have occasion subsequently to notice the repeated references to the Trinity - not as a doctrine, but by implication. In this verse is one of them.

NOTE: - a closely related passage in the Epistle to the Colossians, and written at the same time, seems to give wider meaning to "**ordinances**," with a different emphasis.

"And you, being dead in your sins and the uncircumcision of your flesh, hath he quickened together with him, having forgiven you all trespasses; blotting out the handwriting of ordinances that was against us, which was contrary to us, and took it out of the way, nailing it to his cross" (Colossians 2:13-14).

"Blotting out the handwriting of ordinances," he says. Literally, the "bond" or "note of hand" in respect of ordinances, or decrees. What is the thought which he is seeking to express? The meaning "note of hand" may help us here. When we sign a note, we acknowledge an obligation; we confess a debt.

The race has done this; all men everywhere are doing it continually. Every twinge of conscience puts our signature on the dotted line: every judgment which we pass upon the conduct of our fellow men erects moral standards to which we subscribe. They are our involuntary consent to the rightness of the divine precepts. They are against us. Our souls are mortgaged to meet the obligation, but our resources are utterly inadequate. Someone must underwrite the debt, or

extinguish it, or we are undone.

"**Blotting out**," he says. Of course, if the signature on a note is smeared over, if it is blotted out, no one can collect: the debtor is absolved. But the next expression makes this "bond," this moral obligation, alive. "**Nailing it**," he says, "**to his cross**." It is alive, however, only that it may die.

The whole moral responsibility of man, the obligation to obey every "decree," was personified in Him of whom the Apostle speaks. And He died. And all those who are in Him died in His vicarious death. And you cannot collect on a note from a man who is no longer alive.

~ end of chapter 5 ~

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