Session 4

Reconciled

God reconciles us to Himself in Christ, removing barriers of hostility between believers.

Ephesians 2:11-22

Memory Verse: Ephesians 2:14

READ Ephesians 2:11-22, First Thoughts (p. 44), and Understand the Context (p. 44).

STUDY Ephesians 2:11-22, using Explore the Text (pp. 45–49). As you study, take note of the different ways Paul described the reconciliatory work of Jesus in believers’ lives. For further insight, consult the Explore the Bible Adult Commentary (available in print and digital format from LifeWay.com).

PLAN the group time, keeping in mind this session’s main idea that God reconciles us to Himself in Christ, removing barriers of hostility between believers. Tailor the plans for your group using ideas under Lead Group Bible Study (pp. 50–51), More Ideas (p. 52), and Weekly Adult Extras under the Resources tab at Blog.LifeWay.com/ExploretheBible.

GROW with other group leaders at the Groups Ministry blog (LifeWay.com/GroupMinistry).

GATHER the following items: ☐ Personal Study Guides; ☐ Two current newspapers; ☐ Two pairs of scissors; and ☐ For More Ideas (p. 52): ☐ Objects (or pictures of objects) that polarize people. Prepare to display the following Pack Items: ☐ PACK ITEM 1 (Map: Paul’s Second and Third Journeys); and ☐ PACK ITEM 3 (Poster: The City of Ephesus). Make copies for group members of: ☐ PACK ITEM 12 (Handout: Unity in the New Testament).
FIRST THOUGHTS

Divisions often run deep. Past injustices, current fears, and future imagined responses can contribute to the complexity of tensions. Adding to the complexity, people can be united on one front yet divided on another. Sports teams, shared work goals, and community events may bring diverse groups together yet not remove the divisions that exist away from that event or action. True reconciliation and unity are found in a shared belief in Christ.

(In PSG, p. 37) What are some of the biggest walls you have seen that separate people? What are some of the underlying issues that cause divisions between people and groups?

UNDERSTAND THE CONTEXT

EPHESIANS 2:11-22

Ephesus was a multi-cultural city. Located on a major highway near a seaport, it was a melting pot for many different cultures and religions. One might expect openness and diversity in such a setting. But one group certainly maintained its own cultural identity. The Jews in Ephesus worked hard to maintain the purity of their race and religion.

The separateness of the Jews from other parts of Ephesian culture is best seen in Paul’s visit to Ephesus recorded in Acts 19. As was his custom, Paul began preaching in the synagogue when he arrived in the city (Acts 19:8). The opposition to Paul’s preaching of Jesus was so great that he had to withdraw from the synagogue to preach in the lecture hall of Tyrannus (19:9). Despite many miracles that God performed in Ephesus, the Jews continued to resist the preaching of Christ and even attempted to do miracles in their own power (19:11-20). Though some converted to Christ through these events, many Jews remained hardened in their opposition to the Christian faith.

Many Gentiles also opposed Christianity. The conversion of Gentiles to Christ cut into the profit of those making idols in the worship of Artemis (19:21-27). Even though the climate of Ephesus was open to many religions, the one religion they would not tolerate was Christianity because it required them to give up their idols. Those profiting from that industry stirred up the people against Paul, causing a riot.

The gospel’s message is the one and only way of salvation through Christ. This is not always a popular message, and we can be sure culture will strongly oppose biblical truth. However, Christians should not be the ones to build walls between themselves and the people they are called to reach. They must stand for biblical truth, but standing for truth doesn’t require walling oneself off from the world.
VERSE 11
Salvation is not only an individual work in the lives of people as described in the first part of Ephesians 2. It also involves the creation of a new community of people, not divided by race but united by faith in Christ. Paul began this affirmation by reminding the Ephesians they were once Gentiles in the flesh. This was a reference to the fact they were uncircumcised. The Jewish historian Josephus spoke of Gentiles who laughed at the circumcision of the Jews and ridiculed them for the practice. Yet the Jews continued the practice because they knew it was given by God to Abraham (Gen. 17:2,10-14) and served as their identity as the people of God. Surprisingly, Paul criticized the practice as a form of idolatry. He said that it was done in the flesh by human hands. The Greek word used here was used in the Greek Old Testament in connection to the making of idols (Lev. 26:1,30; Isa. 2:18; 10:11; 19:1; Dan. 5:4,23).

For the Jews, circumcision had become yet another idol that stood in the way of the true worship of God. It was a fleshly attempt to make a connection with God that could only be established by faith in Jesus Christ (Eph. 2:1-10). Using circumcision, the Jews, here referred to as the circumcised, divided themselves from the Gentiles. Such walls were not based upon biblical truth but upon a superiority of the flesh. This caused great division among the people that Paul was called to reach—both Jew and Gentile.

VERSE 12
Paul described four conditions of the Gentiles before they were brought to faith in Christ. First, he said they were without Christ. As non-Jews, Gentiles were cut off from the expectation of the Messiah. They had no expectation of a future Messiah to deliver them from sin and self.

A second condition of the Gentiles was that they were excluded from the citizenship of Israel. Gentiles were well aware of the advantages of Roman citizenship, but they did not know the benefits of being connected to God’s covenant people of Israel. Because of their birth, they were cut off from the people of God. In Romans 9:3-5, Paul enumerated some of the blessings and advantages of the Jews. The Gentiles did not share these advantages.

A third condition of the Gentiles was that they were foreigners to the covenants of promise. Note the plural word covenants. God had made covenants with people like Abraham (Gen. 15:7-21), Isaac (Gen. 26:2-5), Jacob (Gen. 28:13-15), and David (2 Sam. 7). Because the Gentiles were not part of these covenants, they did not share the Jewish hope for the Messiah.

A final condition mentioned by Paul for the Gentiles was that they were without hope and without God in the world. Because the Gentiles did not know the promises of God, they opted to live life in idolatry and to suppress the truth God had revealed to them in creation (Rom. 1:18-23). Paul did not list these conditions to depress the Gentiles but to cause them to marvel at the grace of God in bringing them to Christ.
Why do some Christians lose the wonder of God’s salvation at work in their lives? How can that be prevented?

VERSE 13
13 But now in Christ Jesus, you who were far away have been brought near by the blood of Christ.

VERSE 13
Having explained the dire predicament of the Gentiles outside of Christ, Paul switched the dialogue with the words but now. The Gentiles were no longer without hope and without God. They were now in Christ Jesus. How was this accomplished?

The Gentiles were described as once far away. This was probably influenced by Isaiah 57:19, “The LORD says, ‘Peace, peace to the one who is far or near, and I will heal him.” God’s peace was available to those who were near, a reference to the Jews, but it was also available to those who were far away, the Gentiles. Because Christ came, salvation is available to all. But what force is powerful enough to bring the Jews and Gentiles together?

Paul attributed the creation of this new community to the blood of Christ. The new community was birthed through an event—Jesus’ death on the cross, where He died to bring together one new humanity. The atoning blood of Christ, shed willingly on the cross, not only forgave the sins of those who trusted in Him, but it brought together two diverse groups—Jew and Gentile—into one new community of faith.

PEACE DECLARED (EPH. 2:14-18)

VERSE 14-15
14 For he is our peace, who made both groups one and tore down the dividing wall of hostility. In his flesh, 15 he made of no effect the law consisting of commands and expressed in regulations, so that he might create in himself one new man from the two, resulting in peace.

What are some areas where your church has struggled to tear down walls of division between Christians?
In order for the division between Jews and Gentiles to be broken, Jesus made of no effect the law consisting of commands and expressed in regulations. The word used for made of no effect can also be translated “to make ineffective” or “to render powerless.” The Jews made observance of the law a prerequisite for salvation. The problem was that all people are lawbreakers. No person could keep the law in its entirety. Through His blood, Jesus satisfied the righteous requirements of the law and in doing so brought together those who strove to keep the law (Jews) and those who were ignorant of it (Gentiles). Jesus rendered the law of no effect because whether one tried to keep it or didn’t even know about it, the only hope of meeting its requirements was in Jesus Christ. Jesus’ sacrificial death created one new man from the two. No longer were they Jews versus Gentiles. They were one in Christ, bringing peace.

VERSE 16
Christ’s creation of a new humanity did not merely improve race relations. Rather, He went to the cross to reconcile both to God in one body. The idea of reconciliation was to bring together two parties who were hostile to one another. Both Jews and Gentiles needed reconciliation with God. Their sin had aroused God’s wrath and created hostility between them. Reconciliation to God put the hostility to death. A far greater divide exists between sinful man and holy God than any other hostility among humanity. Yet God bridged that gap through Christ. If God could bridge that gap, couldn’t He also bring diverse people into one new humanity? No human division should be viewed as impossible for reconciliation since God, through Jesus, overcame the greatest hostility of all.

How does your salvation experience give you hope that human relationships can also be mended?

VERSES 17-18
Again the language of Paul provides a clear reference to Isaiah 57:19, where the far away and near language is also found. However, Paul’s language also reminds us of Isaiah 52:7, where it says, “How beautiful on the mountains are the feet of the herald, who proclaims peace, who brings news of good things, who proclaims salvation, who says to Zion, ‘Your God reigns!’” Jesus came and proclaimed the good news of peace to both Jews and Gentiles, and they heard this gospel. Those who believed the gospel were brought together into one new humanity. No longer did the divisions between Jews and Gentiles separate them in worship. Now they both had the opportunity to worship God together. Now all those who proclaim this gospel are forwarding the message of peace to those in need of reconciliation with God and with each other.
The result of the death of Jesus was that through him we both have access in one spirit to the Father. Under Judaism, all did not have equal access to the Father. The Lord’s presence was associated with the holy of holies, where the ark of the covenant resided. Jews were able to come to the threshold of the building containing this room. However, a wall separated the Jews from the Gentiles. The Gentiles could go no farther than the court of the Gentiles. Not mentioned in this passage but relevant to its discussion was the court of women, beyond which Israelite women were not welcomed to pass. So Jewish worship was a divided affair, with Gentiles and women not receiving the same access as Jewish males. In Christ, that access is now opened to all. Now Jews and Gentiles, men and women, can come to the Father. Paul said this was all accomplished through him, meaning through the death of Jesus.

CITIZENSHIP GRANTED (EPH. 2:19-22)

VERSES 19-20

Paul had presented a dire picture of Gentiles outside of faith in Christ (Eph. 2:12). But having gained access to God through Jesus, their picture was reversed in Ephesians 2:19-22. They went from being foreigners and strangers to citizens of God’s kingdom. The first term applied to those who lived outside of the land of Israel, and the second term referred to Gentiles who would come and live in the land of Israel. Either way, they still were not citizens of Israel. But through the power of the cross these foreigners were now called fellow citizens with the saints. The Gentiles were no longer foreigners or second-class citizens in God’s kingdom. Rather, they were citizens with all the rights and responsibilities associated with it. However, the bond went even deeper than citizenship. Paul called the Gentile Christians members of God’s household. God’s people are not merely a kingdom but also a family. In Galatians Paul spoke of the household of faith (Gal. 6:10). Here he called the new community of Christians God’s household. Those who trust in God’s provision through Jesus Christ become part of His family. Believers are adopted into the family of God, and when that happens, they find that they have many new brothers and sisters as part of their family.

How do the images of God’s kingdom and family promote unity within in the church?

God’s household was built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets. These two offices in the early church were connected, as seen by their inclusion in Ephesians 4:11 as ministry gifts given to those who were serving the church. The apostles included the twelve disciples, but probably also included others, like Barnabas, who were establishing local churches in
new locales (Acts 14:14). Prophets were those who had been called to edify and build up the church (1 Cor. 14:4). As these gifted persons preached the gospel, they centered on Christ Jesus himself as the cornerstone. This was an architectural reference that described either the capstone or foundational stone that held the whole structure together. As prophets and apostles preached Jesus, God was building a new humanity.

Why is it important for those who preach or teach to put Jesus at the center of their message?

The hearts of believers serve as the most important place of worship now for the new community of faith.

VERSES 21-22
The Jewish people often spoke of God as abiding on Mount Zion in Jerusalem. But under the new covenant, God was building a holy temple among His church. The word used of temple does not refer to the entire temple complex but the inner portion containing the holy place and the holy of holies. The idea was that God would not dwell in a temple made with human hands but would dwell among His people. The whole building would include both Jews and Gentiles who would come together to form a new temple of the Lord. The hearts of believers serve as the most important place of worship now for the new community of faith.

This new community is being built together for God’s dwelling. The word dwelling was based on the Greek word for home. Paul believed God is now making His home in the lives of those who profess faith in Christ. This happens in the Spirit. As believers put their faith in Christ, they are sealed with the Holy Spirit (Eph. 1:13-14). The Holy Spirit takes up residence in the hearts of those who trust Christ. God now makes Himself at home in the life of the believer. As Christians unite together with the same faith, God makes His dwelling there. Instead of a provincial temple, where only the Jews were welcomed into the inner portion, God longs for all people—Jew and Gentile—to enter beyond the dividing wall that once separated them. He wants all His children in His presence.

VERSES 21-22
21 In him the whole building, being put together, grows into a holy temple in the Lord. 22 In him you are also being built together for God’s dwelling in the Spirit.
LEAD GROUP BIBLE STUDY

FOCUS ATTENTION (FIRST THOUGHTS)

WELCOME: As people gather, place them into two teams based on where they are sitting. Give each team a newspaper and a pair of scissors. Instruct one team to cut out headlines that highlight a lack of peace in the world, while the second group cuts out headlines that point to examples of peace. After most have arrived, invite volunteers to share with everyone what they discovered through this exercise.

EXPLAIN: Today we will be reminded that Jesus brings peace. The newspaper headlines reveal that peace can be hard to come by in our world, but one place that peace should always be evident is among believers. God reconciles us to Himself in Christ, removing barriers of hostility between believers.

REVIEW: Discuss key points from Understand the Context in the PSG (p. 38). Direct the group to Pack Item 1 (Map: Paul’s Second and Third Journeys) and Pack Item 3 (Poster: The City of Ephesus) to remind them of the location and context for this letter.

TRANSITION: As we explore today’s text, pay attention to the metaphors used by Paul.

EXPLORE THE TEXT

READ: Direct a volunteer to read Ephesians 2:11-13, while the group underlines descriptions of the Gentiles apart from Christ and circles descriptions of the Gentiles in Christ.

EXPLAIN: Many Jews in Paul’s day, most notably the religious leaders like the Pharisees, placed a greater emphasis on their rules and ceremonies than they did on belief in Jesus. They failed to see that sin, not race or heritage, was what ultimately separated a person from God. Paul reminded readers that apart from Christ, both Jews and Gentiles (non-Jews) are without hope and separated from God. But in the same way, in Christ both Jews and Gentiles find redemption from sin and reconciliation to God.

HIGHLIGHT: On a board or large sheet of paper, lead the group to list the identifying traits of the Gentiles’ pre-conversion condition (v. 12). Then call on a volunteer to read the first paragraph on page 40 of the PSG.

ASK: How does a lack of intimacy with God fuel division and prejudice among people? How are divisions an indicator of our need for a Savior? (PSG, p. 40)

DISCUSS: Next to the list from verse 12, lead the group to create a second list of the Gentiles’ post-conversion condition (v. 13). Discuss the change brought about by Christ. Ask: What changed in Christ? Why was this such good news for the Gentiles?

STATE: Clarify from the PSG (p. 40): Paul explained to the Ephesians that they were “now in Christ Jesus.” This key phrase denoted their union with Him, whereas previously they were dominated by their sinful nature. They had been “brought near” through Christ’s death on the cross for their sins.

TRANSITION: After establishing that Gentiles can be reconciled to God and united with Jews through the death of Christ, Paul declared that Christ alone brings reconciliation and peace to all people.
READ: Encourage the group to read Ephesians 2:14-18 silently, highlighting the metaphors Paul used to describe Jesus’ work of reconciliation.

MINI-LECTURE: Present a mini-lecture on verses 14-18, reviewing the key points from the PSG (pp. 41–42). Using various metaphors and illustrations (wall, body, etc.), Paul described Jesus as our peace, the one who breaks down all the divisions sin creates among people. Because of the cross, people are united in Jesus and can love and serve Him together. A unified body of believers is especially important when we think about our calling to reflect the love and peace of Jesus to the world.

DISCUSS: How does a common sinfulness lead to division while a common faith in Christ lead to unity? (PSG, p. 42) Explain how you have experienced this firsthand.

SHARE: Read aloud the following statement from the PSG (p. 42): Access to God the Father is given to all who believe through the Holy Spirit. Paul used a word for access that denoted a person in a royal court who escorted a visitor into the king’s presence. Ask: How does this description help you better understand Jesus’ work of reconciliation?

TRANSITION: Having described the what and how of Jesus’ reconciliation, Paul closed this section of his Letter to the Ephesians with a resounding “why.”

READ: Read aloud Ephesians 2:19-22, and encourage the group to listen for the goal of Jesus’ reconciliatory work.

DIRECT: Read the Key Doctrine (The Church) in the PSG (p. 44). Explain that when believers are unified with one another, they show the world a glimpse of the eternal kingdom of God.

GUIDE: Distribute Pack Item 12 (Handout: Unity in the New Testament). Enlist volunteers to read some of the passages included on the handout. Ask: How do these verses help you better understand why unity in the body of Christ is so important to God?

DISCUSS: How does a shared citizenship in God’s family impact how believers view one another? (PSG, p. 44) Is there anything anyone shared in today’s discussion that has changed how you have previously answered that question?

SUMMARIZE AND CHALLENGE (IN MY CONTEXT)

REVIEW: Draw attention to and discuss the bulleted points under In My Context (PSG, p. 45). Review the metaphors Paul used in today’s passages. Ask: How do these metaphors describe the actions of Christ in fulfilling God’s purpose of reconciliation? (PSG, p. 38)

CHALLENGE: Discuss together the first question set on page 45 of the PSG: What could your small group do to promote unity and reconciliation between believers in your community or city? Come up with at least one actionable thing you will do before the end of this quarter.

PRAY: Close in prayer by thanking God for bringing peace to our relationships with Him and with others. Pray that your group would be a clear reflection of unity in Christ to the rest of your church, and ask God to break down any walls of hostility in your church community.
PRACTICE

• Spend time in prayer for the people in your group. Pray that they would be united in Christ and with other believers in their lives. Ask God to reveal to them any areas where sin is creating disunity.

• Take time to reflect on the following question set from In My Context (PSG, p. 45) as it relates to leading your group: Do you know someone who needs to know he or she has a place in God’s household as a result of faith in Jesus? How can you help this believer find his or her place and be welcomed? Identify someone who appears to be an outsider from your social circle and invite him or her to be a part of one of your gatherings.

MORE IDEAS

FOCUS ATTENTION (FIRST THOUGHTS)

For an alternate Focus Attention activity, show the group some objects (or pictures of objects) that polarize people (examples: beans/no beans, a cat/dog, salty/sweet, winter/summer). Explain: The way people respond passionately and differently to those objects shows us that people will divide over anything. Ask: What are some of the underlying issues that cause divisions between people and groups? (PSG, p. 37) Transition by saying: Today, we will learn that unity matters to God, and that He went to great lengths to unify people to Himself and to one another.

EXPLORE THE TEXT

• To aid in the discussion of Ephesians 2:11-13, read the following statement from the PSG (p. 40): Oneness in Christ—a key component of the gospel message—is a defined reality. God calls believers to work toward what is already true in heaven. Divide up into small teams and discuss the following question from the PSG (p. 40): As a believer in Christ, what actions might one take to begin to break down the walls of prejudice in our world today?

• For further study of Ephesians 2:14-18, consider the example of peace and unity that Jesus gave us through His earthly ministry. Think about the various relationships He had and the healings He performed. Ask: How do we see Jesus bringing peace among people in the Gospels? Lead the group to share some specific examples that come to mind.

• To help the group better understand the imagery of Jesus as the cornerstone for God’s household (Eph. 2:20-21), lead the group to complete the Bible Skill activity in the PSG (p. 43).

SUMMARIZE AND CHALLENGE (IN MY CONTEXT)

Allow time for the group to reflect silently on the second question set on page 45 of the PSG: Examine your life for things you depend upon for peace other than faith in Christ. Thank God for giving you peace and commit afresh to trust in Him more completely.

SUGGESTED MUSIC IDEA

Play the song “In You,” by Dave Hunt, from the album Love Abounds. Remind your group that reconciliation with others cannot happen until our hearts are reconciled to God.