

## **One People or Two? The Challenge Raised to Dispensationalism by Ephesians 2:11-22<sup>1</sup>**

It was the famed New York Yankees' catcher turned philosopher, Yogi Berra, who once said, "when you come to a fork in the road, take it!" Paul's discussion in Ephesians 2:11-22, addresses the relationship between Jew and Gentile in Christ's church. It is a passage which requires us to ask a "fork in the road" sort of question. "In the new covenant era, does God have one people (the church), or two peoples (Jew and Gentile) each assigned different redemptive purposes?" Reformed amillennarians and dispensationalists take quite different directions when coming to this important Pauline "fork in the road."

Dispensationalists struggle to understand and explain Ephesians 2:11-22 because Paul asserts something much different than the standard dispensational claim that although there is but one gospel, nevertheless, God has two distinct redemptive purposes, one for national Israel and another for Gentiles.

To illustrate the problem faced by dispensationalists, it is useful to survey the way in which traditional dispensational writers have approached this passage. J. Dwight Pentecost, writes that this passage describes God's purpose for the present age (where there is a visible unity), but does not describe his purpose for the millennial age when the two peoples (Jew and Gentiles) are again distinct groups. Pentecost is so bold as to state, "Scripture is unintelligible until one can distinguish clearly between God's program for his earthly people Israel and that for the church." [1]

John Walvoord understands the passage as referring to the "new program" for the church which, he claims, was a mystery in the Old Testament. In the New Testament dispensation, a living union is formed so that Jew and Gentile are brought together with all racial tensions eliminated [2]. Like Pentecost, Walvoord argues that such unity is only temporary and in the millennial age the historic and ethnic differences between Jew and Gentile re-emerge.

Charles Ryrie cites Ephesians 2:15 as proof that the church was a mystery in the Old Testament, since a "new man" only appears in the new covenant era. [3] While Charles Dyer agrees with Ryrie, he issues the following caution. "One must be careful in reading too much meaning into an analogy," referring to Paul's use of the phrase, "the new man." Dyer concludes, "the mere presence of an analogy does not automatically argue for the fulfillment of Old Testament prophecy." [4] Paul is speaking of the unity Jews and Gentiles currently experience as in no sense a fulfillment of Old Testament prophecy.

Recent defenders of dispensationalism, such as Barry Horner, contend that the Reformed interpretation of this passage—which he correctly acknowledges is a critical point of difference between the two views—completely eliminates any distinction between Jew and Gentile. Horner sees the Reformed amillennarian reading of Ephesians 2 [discussed below] as a "fundamental

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<sup>1</sup> Taken from the Riddleblog@kimriddlebarger.com

error,” because it supposedly obliterates any cultural or ethnic distinction between Jewish and Gentile Christians, when the New Testament expressly allows for such distinctions.[5] Michael Vlach agrees, for the most part, stating that “Gentiles are brought near to Israel’s covenants, promises, hope, and God but `they do not become Israel; they share with Israel. . . . Nothing is said about Gentiles becoming Jews or part of Israel unless we refine Israel.”[6] Vlach’s fear is that if Jews and Gentiles truly become members of one body in Christ’s church, this refutes a fundamental dispensational operating assumption forcing a redefinition of Israel (which the New Testament actually does—see Jesus Christ -- The Israel of God). John MacArthur takes a different approach, avoiding importing the problematic dispensational freight as with the views just cited. “The salvific unity that all believers experience in Christ (see Ephesians 2:11-22) in no way rules out God’s future dealings with nations, including Israel.”[7] Yes, God may again deal with Israel in the future, as MacArthur deftly side-steps the more problematic assertions cited above.

From the perspective of Reformed amillennialism, there are several significant points of response to the dispensational interpretation of this passage. First, suppose, for the sake of argument, that this passage is indeed talking about God’s “new program” for the church age, and that Paul is describing what happens when God temporarily joins Jew and Gentile together in the church (his purpose only for this present age). If true, then what happens when the Gentile church is raptured (removed) from the earth at the beginning of the seven-year tribulation period? According to dispensationalists, from that point on, God’s redemptive purposes shift from salvation of the Gentiles, back to national Israel during both the tribulation and millennial age. That which Paul says Christ came to do—make the two peoples one (Ephesians 2:15)—is reversed in the millennial age. So, the redemptive work of Jesus Christ in uniting Jew and Gentile into his spiritual body, which is his church, is but a mere analogy, or a temporary state of affairs.

If dispensationalists are correct about this, redemptive history moves forward (from type and shadow to fulfillment and reality) until the so-called tribulation when Gentile Christians are removed from the earth in the Rapture. Then, in one gigantic redemptive-historical U-turn, God’s greater purposes now return to the same Old Testament types and shadows which existed before the coming of Christ, which pointed to him, and which in his death and resurrection he has already fulfilled! The one man is divided, the barrier is re-erected, those brought near are far off again, peace is replaced by division, and the abolition of the commandments comes to an end. In other words, we return to the Old Testament redemptive economy. Really? Is what Jesus came to accomplish but a mere temporary state of affairs anticipating a return to types and shadows?

Second, as Charles Dyer cautions his brethren, dispensationalists need to be clear that Paul is only using an analogy here, and that he is not speaking literally. This is a highly problematic qualification for Dyer to make since dispensationalists often chide amillennarians about supposedly allegorizing clear passages and “spiritualizing” them. Now, says Dyer, the heart of Ephesians 2:11-22 (v. 15) is a mere analogy about a transitional “new man” phase of redemptive history and has nothing whatsoever to do with the fulfillment of prophecy. Paul is supposedly using an analogy to make a point, but he’s not speaking of a major shift in the course of

redemptive history brought about by Jesus Christ. But is the coming of Jesus to make the two people into one through his death, resurrection, ascension, and out-pouring of the Spirit at Pentecost, not the critical shift in redemptive history?

When those (like Dyer) claim to hold their view because they interpret the Bible “literally,” and then deny the “literal interpretation” of a passage which largely serves to undo a critical plank in the dispensational hermeneutic—that God has two people treated differently in the progress of redemption—we must call attention to the gravity of their error, as well as the “pick and choose” character of their so-called “literal hermeneutic.”

Yes, Paul is using the “new man” analogy in verse 15 to explain to his readers the wonder of what has happened with the coming of Jesus Christ. Gentiles, who were separated from Christ and aliens to the commonwealth of Israel, who were strangers to the covenants of promise, who were without hope, and without God in the world (vv. 12-13), have now been brought near by the blood of Christ (v. 13). Both have been made one with true Israel. Was not this prophesied in the Old Testament and then fulfilled by Christ during his messianic mission? Since the answer can only be “yes,” then dispensational operating assumptions and interpretive outcomes can be seen to be completely untenable.

Paul’s whole point is that in Jesus Christ, God takes these two distinct groups (Jew and Gentile) and makes them one person (a “new man”), incorporating Jew and Gentile alike as fellow citizens of the same spiritual house (Christ’s church – vv. 19-22). Therefore, Paul can speak of the barrier wall which separated the outer court of the Gentiles from the inner court in the Jerusalem temple, as being “torn down” (v. 14). The barrier was removed when Jesus Christ fulfilled the Mosaic economy (rendering it obsolete, cf. Hebrews 8:13), and then united both Jew and Gentile into one “new man” (v. 15-18). The ground of God’s hostility toward us (our sin), as well as our hostility toward each other (Jewish exclusiveness and Gentile godlessness) have been removed through the doing and dying of Jesus. That which was hidden in type and shadow in the Old Testament has been fulfilled—God will call countless Gentiles to faith in Israel’s Messiah beginning with the messianic restoration, a purpose which is fully brought into the open through Christ’s redemptive work.

Third, Horner misses the point Reformed amillennarians are making about this passage when we speak of God’s purpose in Jesus Christ as making the two peoples (Jew and Gentile) one in the Savior. When Paul recounts that God brings Jews and Gentiles together in the church, Paul never insists that Jews stop living as Jews (culturally or ethnically). Rather, it is the other way around. The apostles and elders repeatedly warn Jewish Christians (cf. Galatians 1-3; Acts 15) that it is a serious doctrinal error to insist that Gentile converts to Christianity live as Jews, accept ritual circumcision, keep the dietary laws, and feast days, in order to be justified. The critical point in Ephesians 2:11-22 is that God takes ethnic Jews (with all of their history and culture—indeed Paul himself lived as a Jew, although he was willing to become all things to all men)—and then joins them together with Gentiles (of every race and tongue) into one church, indwelt by one Spirit, and now constituted the temple of the living God.

In fact, God's joining of Jew and Gentile together into one new man takes place on the basis of Christ's redemptive work (v. 16), not because Jews give up their ethnic and cultural identity. It was the same Apostle Paul who tells us in Galatians 3:26-29, "for in Christ Jesus you are all sons of God, through faith. For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is no male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus. And if you are Christ's, then you are Abraham's offspring, heirs according to promise?"

To summarize, in Ephesians 2:11-22, Paul makes the following points. (1). Through the redemptive work of Jesus Christ (vv. 13, 16), God has brought Gentiles (formerly aliens and strangers, vv. 12-13) into God's house (the church, vv. 19-22), along with those Jews who likewise embrace Christ through faith (vv. 14-19). (2). This was God's purpose from the beginning. (3). Indeed the church is God's holy temple, indwelt by Christ's blessed Spirit. (4). This points in the direction of the final consummation, because that same indwelling Spirit guarantees the resurrection of our bodies (Ephesians 1:13-14), so that we dwell upon a new heaven and earth, the home of righteousness—not in an earthly millennial kingdom when everything Jesus came to do to make Jew and Gentile one is undone.

To insist, as dispensationalists do, that this glorious temple (his church) which Jesus is currently building is somehow torn apart when Christ returns to remove the Gentile church (remember, this church also includes Jewish believers) and set up his millennial reign upon the earth, contradicts the whole point of Ephesians 2:11-22. To argue that this passage is but a mere analogy with no reference to fulfilled prophecy is also a swing and a miss (a weak swing at that). To argue that the Reformed amillennial interpretation somehow requires a complete obliteration of the distinction between Jews (ethnically/culturally) does not follow, and actually obscures yet another significant problem raised by the dispensational reading of this passage—ignoring that Jewish insistence upon Gentile conformity to the law of Moses was the real problem, not Gentile insistence that Jews cease living like Jews (which never happened).

At the end of the day, it is hard for me to see how this passage is anything but a serious challenge to the dispensational interpretation of Scripture.

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[1] J. Dwight Pentecost, Things to Come, Zondervan, 1978, 528-529.

[2] John Walvoord, Major Bible Prophecies, Zondervan, 1991, 241-242.

[3] Charles Ryrie, Dispensationalism, Moody, 1996, 125.

[4] Charles Dyer, "The Biblical Meaning of Fulfillment" in Issues in Dispensationlism, (Moody, 1994), 59-60.

[5] Barry Horner, Future Israel, (B & H Academic, 2007), 269-275.

[6] Michael Vlach, Has the Church Replaced Israel? (B & H, 2010), 155.

[7] John MacArthur and Richard Mayhue, Christ's Prophetic Plans (Moody, 2012), 105.