

Northwest Community Evangelical Free Church

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Sermon manuscript

Sermon Series: The Scandal of Jesus' Beautiful Gospel

A Gospel That Unites

(Ephesians 2:11--3:7)

Study #3

Introduction: From Dr. John Perkins...

In February of this year, we were honored to host Dr. John Perkins here at Northwest.

Dr. Perkins (born in 1930) is a legendary Christian leader, Bible teacher, civil rights figure, author, and more.

When he was with us, he clearly expressed his personal vision for Jesus' church. He longs see, *"people from every nationality, every tongue, praising God together, displaying His loving power."*

Dr. Perkins has spoken of this vision for diversity, for multi-ethnic ministry, and for reconciliation between people groups for decades and in lots of places.

Many times, he's gotten resistance and pushback. He's been told that a vision of the church being a great melting pot of ethnicities and demographics is doomed and dumb, wrong, scandalous.

In fact, though, his vision is exactly God's vision for His church. It's His vision for our church.

This morning we'll see the biblical basis for the scandalous beauty of a wildly diverse church based on Jesus' Gospel.

Review...

Over the past two Sundays, we have taken note that the beautiful Gospel of Jesus is scandalous because...
...it offers eternal life, not as a reward for good works, but *as a gift* to the one who simply believes in Jesus.
...it offers eternal life to those who *don't deserve it*.

This is the glorious, scandalous Gospel Jesus has given us to share with our friends and families. And now we come to the third scandal of Jesus' Gospel.

In Paul's letter to the church in the city of Ephesus, he tells us (2:1-10) that the death of Jesus on the cross and His resurrection from the dead provides the basis for a reconciled relationship with God.

Paul drives home how completely broken things are between us (people, generally) and God apart from Christ.

He uses terms like **[1] *dead in your trespasses and sins*** and **[3] *living in the lusts of our flesh*** and ***children of wrath*** to describe our plight.

Because of His great mercy, God rescued us from that plight.

[8] *For by grace you have been saved through faith; and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God; [9] not as a result of works, that no one should boast.*

We are reconciled to God when we place our trust in Jesus - and that's Gospel. That's good news.

In what follows, Paul highlights another sort of reconciliation that is a benefit of Jesus' gift.

He's already walked us through our lost-to-found journey. But, beginning at verse eleven, he tells the story again. He gets more specific about people like you and me.

I suspect that Dr. Perkins gets real excited every time he hears these words, because Paul gets pretty pointed, ethnically speaking.

The Work of Christ as Reconciliation (2:11-22)

Reconciled with God (2:11-13)

Outside of Christ - LOST (vv. 11-12)

[11] Therefore remember, that formerly you, the Gentiles in the flesh, who are called 'Uncircumcision' by the so-called 'Circumcision,' which is performed in the flesh by human hands...

Paul is writing to the members of the church in Ephesus. These folks were predominantly non-Jewish. As a point of reference, and, for what it's worth, that's us, ethnically speaking.

And we who are non-Jews (Gentiles) should know that the spiritual status of non-Jews has always been bleak.

The Jews had received tons and tons of special blessings from God that we Gentiles had not.

Separate from the Messiah's hope (v. 12a)

[12] remember that you were at that time separate from Christ...

For instance, dating back to the days of Abraham (~2000 BC), the Jews had eagerly looked forward to the coming of a Savior. The Jews referred to this Savior as Messiah or "Christ." Christ would deliver them from oppressors, grant them forgiveness, and usher in God's Kingdom.

We Gentiles, though, had no hope for a good end to history.

Stoic philosophers of the first century, taught that history was going nowhere. It repeated itself in three-thousand-year cycles.

They believed that at the end of each three-thousand-year cycle the universe was burned up and then remade by the gods to repeat the same futile pattern.

The non-Jewish worldview included no sense of purpose, no idea of a redemption by a Messiah who would put all things right.

Nor did our ancestors ever have the tremendous benefit of the blessings God gave to Israel.

Separate from Israel (v. 12b)

[12] you were...excluded from the commonwealth of Israel, and strangers to the covenants of promise...

Israel received promises, laws, kings, and judges from God. The Jews received the prophets, the priesthood, the sacrifices, and God's special guidance.

Gentiles got none of these.

Strike one: no Messiah. Strike two: no particular blessings. Strike three follows.

Separate from God! (v. 12c)

[12c] having no hope and without God in the world.

With respect to this life? Without God. Alone in the cosmos. Alienated, with more of the same to look forward to in the life to come.¹ Same prospect for the life after this life is over.

Paul's point here is to say that this is the status of every one of us - particularly us Gentiles - unless we have placed our trust in Jesus.²

¹ Paul says that Gentiles were without God in the world, but they had "gods" galore. (See Acts 17 and Paul on Mars Hill.) It is possible to be extremely religious while knowing nothing of the one, true God.

² Paul is speaking specifically about Gentiles. Jews without Christ are lost, too. But they had a hope of Messiah - even though they didn't recognize that it was Jesus.

In Christ, brought near to God (v. 13)

[13] But now in Christ Jesus you who formerly were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ.

Jesus has bridged the gulf between us and God. We who had been estranged are now reconciled to God. He has made us spiritually and eternally alive.

And this reconciliation between us and God has provided the basis for enjoying reconciled relationships with each other.

Reconciled with Each Other (2:14-22)

In Christ, we are brought near to each other (vv. 14-16)

Walls, generally

Paul uses the image of a wall to describe relational breakdown between people. It's a good and a timely image, because, these days, there's a lot of talk about walls.

I don't know what you think about wall-building. But any wall will illustrate that all walls have a job to do. Nehemiah's wall around Jerusalem, the Great Wall of China and Hadrian's Wall in England and the Berlin Wall in Germany all did their job.

They kept people in or out. They divided people.

If you wanted to cite "irreconcilable differences" between two people or people groups, you could do no better than to refer to a wall.

Walls between Jews and non-Jews

Throughout the two thousand years prior to Christ, biblically speaking, humanity was divided into two camps: Jews and non-Jews.

Jews didn't have much to do with Gentiles. Gentiles didn't go out of their way to have much to do with Jews. It was like a giant wall had been erected between us Gentiles and Jews.

Jews and Gentiles were the Hatfields and McCoy's of the ancient world.

There was even a literal wall of separation between Jews and Gentiles in the temple in Jerusalem.

This wall divided the outer temple area (where Gentiles could go) from the inner court (where Gentiles could *not* go). On that wall was a sign that read:

"No Gentile may enter within the barricade which surrounds the sanctuary and enclosure. Anyone who is caught doing so will have himself to blame for his own death."³

That temple wall was a graphic picture of the relational wall that existed between Jews and Gentiles. In Christ, though, that wall of separation was torn down.

It was the strangest thing, but as churches were established in Asia Minor and elsewhere throughout the Roman Empire, and then beyond, Jews and Gentiles got along.

They formed great friendships, loved each other, worshipped together. Here's how Paul says it.

[14] For He Himself is our peace, who made both groups into one, and broke down the barrier of the dividing wall⁴, [15] by abolishing in His flesh the enmity, which is the Law of commandments contained in ordinances, that in Himself He might make the two into one new man, thus establishing peace, [16] and might reconcile them both in one body to God through the cross, by it having put to death the enmity.

³ This "Court of the Gentiles" was to be a place of Jewish evangelism of the visiting Gentiles, but it had become, as Jesus said, "a robber's den."

⁴ God had wanted the Jews to be distinct from all other nations, so that these would be enticed by the differences to trust Israel's God. Israel was to be a light, an evangelistic force in the world - a stewardship they obviously did not fulfill.

[17] And He came and preached PEACE TO YOU WHO WERE FAR AWAY, AND PEACE TO THOSE WHO WERE NEAR; [18] for through Him we both have our access in one Spirit to the Father.

Paul wrote in one of his earliest letters, (Galatians 3:28), in Christ, there are now no divisions between Jew and Gentile. Then, he went on to mention the breaking down of the walls between other groups: male and female, slave and free. In Christ, all have equal standing before God.

This was revolutionary. And this, I believe, gives us freedom to translate the first century Jew/Gentile division to a 2018 context.

In Christ, division between labor and management, enlisted and officers, home-schoolers and public schoolers and private schoolers, married and single, young and old, wealthy and not - and any other category you can name - need not divide us.

In Christ, there is now no wall dividing Blacks and Hispanics and Asians and Anglos.

We who are in Christ Jesus are “one” despite our many differences.⁵

Again. Jesus’ death on the cross and His resurrection from the dead effected reconciliation between God and us. *And* His death and resurrection provided the basis for reconciliation between people who are as diverse as you could ever imagine.

How connected are we? Real connected.

For one thing, in Christ we are as connected to each other as *citizens* of a kingdom are connected to each other.

In Christ, we are a new society (vv. 19-22)

We are citizens of His kingdom (v. 19a)

[19a] So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are fellow citizens with the saints...

Throughout history citizenship has always been a big deal. It was certainly a big deal in ancient Rome.

Roman citizenship was primarily conveyed by birth, although it could be bought.⁶ And if you were a Roman citizen, you enjoyed many special privileges.

You had the right to vote, you had the right to due process and could appeal to Caesar if you were accused of a capital offense. If convicted, you were exempt from flogging and crucifixion.

Citizenship is a big deal today, too.

I think - and you do, too - that all people should be treated with dignity, whether they are citizens or not. But there’s no denying that, in any nation, citizenship is tremendously important and beneficial.

Each year thousands of people go through the very challenging process of becoming citizens of the US. They want to enjoy the privileges associated with being a citizen of this country.

Beginning this fall, our ESL ministry is offering citizenship classes here at church, because we recognize how important getting on a pathway to citizenship is. Northwest is, again, hosting an Immigrant Hope conference in January for the same reason.⁷

Citizenship matters.

⁵ Galatians 3:28. This does not necessarily mean that all functional distinctions have been done away with, either in society or even in the church. The point is that while there may be functional distinctives, there is equal access to God and equal status before God for all who are in Christ.

⁶ See Acts 22:28.

⁷ Immigrant Hope trains legal professionals and others interested in helping immigrants find a path to legal status in the US.

Well, there is a kingdom, greater than any empire that has ever flown a flag or raised an army. It is the Kingdom of God, and its citizens become such not by birth, but by re-birth. No one purchases this citizenship (it's a gift), and nobody earns it (we don't deserve it).

We who are citizens of this kingdom owe our allegiance to the KING of Kings and the LORD of Lords.

Citizenship in this kingdom supersedes citizenship in any other kingdom, and if you and someone else are both citizens of God's kingdom through faith in Jesus, that connection transcends any and all differences that might exist between you.

If you and a person of a different skin color are both citizens of God's kingdom, you are connected. You are connected as fellow-citizens of God's kingdom to the man in Eritrea, Africa, to the woman in Indonesia, to the child in Chiapas, Mexico who is suffering for Jesus.

Second, in Christ, we are members of God's *family*.

We are God's family (v. 19b)

[19b]... and are of God's household

The ties between family members run deep. They are ties as deep as DNA. When your brother or sister is in crisis, you bleed. When your child suffers, you are in pain. When your aging parent slips and falls, something in you breaks.

When you trust Jesus for eternal life, you are adopted into God's forever family. God the Father becomes your adopting Father, which makes you brother or sister to all others who have trusted Jesus.

In neither a flesh-and-blood family nor in the family of God do we get to choose our family members. Family connections just "are" - and that's why both family reunions and church are so entertaining.

Colorful personalities show up. So do differences of opinion about sports and politics. The poor and the rich, eccentrics, young and old, healthy and not so healthy are all there - and are all welcomed.

The blood that binds at family reunions is thick. The blood of Christ by which we were redeemed and which unites us is thicker still.

It is a wonderful thing to be a part of a loving human family. To be a part of God's family, united with God as Father and Jesus as Savior, is unspeakably rich.

Being in God's family doesn't mean that we are protected against all misfortune. It does mean that we are protected against the greatest misfortune.

Being in God's family doesn't mean that we will have a life of ease. It does mean that we will lead a life of purpose; it does mean that when trials come, we can expect support, when we fall, we can expect help; when we stray, others will call us back.

We are fellow-citizens and we are family. Paul also says that we are, corporately, God's *temple*.

We are God's temple (vv. 20-22)

[20] having been built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus Himself being the corner stone, [21] in whom the whole building, being fitted together is growing into a holy temple in the Lord; [22] in whom you also are being built together into a dwelling of God in the Spirit.

Temples appear in most every culture. Temples are buildings designed to enhance sacred worship in that culture.

The temple in Jerusalem promoted worship in the national life of Israel. That temple also served as a light to the nations so that all might come to know the Lord.

Paul tells us that we - Jesus' people - are now God's temple. He even provides blueprints. (vv. 20-22)

Just like in all ancient buildings, the cornerstone was the first stone laid. The entire project depended on the cornerstone.

If the cornerstone was of the wrong size, shape, badly positioned, or poorly laid, the building would suffer.

The cornerstone of God's temple is Jesus. Everything that follows is built around Him.

The foundation of this temple Paul is describing consists of the teaching and the ministries of the apostles and prophets.

He's referring to the formative stages of the church's existence. The original apostles and the prophets who lived within a generation or two of Jesus laid the all-important foundation.

And ever since those early days, the superstructure of the temple has been "under construction." "Pardon our dust" is perpetual in the church as layer upon layer is added year by year, generation by generation.

In Europe, massive cathedrals were sometimes centuries in the making. The worshippers were always adding a new room, a new alcove, a new chapel, a new flying buttress, a new-and-improved stained-glass window.

For the last two thousand years, God has been adding stones on to His temple. These stones are the lives of us who believe in Jesus who make up the church. WE are the superstructure.

We - together - are all to be all about worship and we are all to be light, directing those we love to the Lord who has saved us. The idea is that when someone on the outside looks at the beautiful way we "temple stones" fit with each other, work together, love each other, they will be drawn to our Jesus.

There is a fundamental unity binding together all of us who trust in Jesus.

Whether we are Jews or Gentiles, male or female, young or old, rich or poor, Hispanic, Black, Asian, or Anglo, we are fellow-citizens of the Kingdom of God, brothers and sisters in the family of God, stones in God's temple.

That is the church. And the church is currently God's main tool to further His purposes in the world today.

Who would have ever thought God would use something as scandalous as a rag-tag group of fundamentally diverse people to reach a lost world?

It turns out that this has been God's plan all along. It was, though, until Jesus, a "mystery."

The Purpose of God as Reconciliation (3:1-7)

Mystery (vv. 1-4)

[3:1] For this reason I, Paul, the prisoner of Christ Jesus for the sake of you Gentiles-- [2] if indeed you have heard of the stewardship of God's grace which was given to me for you; [3] that by revelation there was made known to me the mystery, as I wrote before in brief. [4] And by referring to this, when you read you can understand my insight into the mystery of Christ...

When we think "mystery" today, we may think of Sherlock Holmes, Agatha Christie or Father Brown.

There is a puzzle that needs to be solved. If we put the right clues together, think long and hard about it, we'll figure it out.

That is not what Paul means by the word "mystery." He means to say that the idea of a "church" as we know it was never revealed in times past.

You can look throughout the entire Old Testament and you will never see anything like the church. Nobody from Moses to Malachi saw it coming.

And it wasn't that nobody ever imagined that Gentiles would be saved. No, there are stories of Gentiles coming to know the Lord all over the Old Testament.

What nobody would have ever imagined is that Jews and Gentiles would be *united* in one body as equal participants in God's plan to bless the world.⁸

But that was exactly God's plan.

NOT Separate, REAL Diverse, TOTALLY Equal (vv. 5-7)

[5] which in other generations was not made known to the sons of men, as it has now been revealed to His holy apostles and prophets in the Spirit; [6] to be specific, that the Gentiles are FELLOW HEIRS and FELLOW MEMBERS of the body, and FELLOW PARTAKERS of the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel, [7] of which I was made a minister, according to the gift of God's grace which was given to me according to the working of His power.

God has organized the church in such a way that every member is equal to every other member. Despite tremendous diversity, there are no second-class citizens in the Kingdom of God. There is the Head - Jesus - and then there is all of us.

And why was it so important to God that there be equality among His diverse people?

It is because just such a united group of people - all equally *valuable* to God and all equally *vital* to the group - shouts "*Welcome!*"

It says "*Welcome!*" in the most inviting way to anyone who is far from God because of sin and who needs what only God can provide: Eternal life through faith in Jesus.

As we close this morning, I invite you to dream with me. We'll begin with what's real.

Conclusion:

What is real is that, in Christ, we are united at the heart. We are connected by Jesus' scandalously beautiful Gospel.

There is a lot of evidence of unity here at our church.

Food and prayer go out to those in need. We learn and worship together. We serve together. I regularly hear of tangible expressions of love flowing from one person to another - just the sorts of things you would expect to find where there are organic connections.

Now. What if we all upped our game? What if we all took some "next steps"?

You're already pouring out love. Great! Today, you commit more deeply to love. You're already serving. Wonderful! This morning, you determine to open your eyes wider to the needs around you and to serve more.

I could certainly improve my serve. I could love with more passion and self-sacrifice. If I did, and if you did, too, imagine the impact we would make in San Antonio.

What if we were seen to be the people who love and serve and stand with and support each other, despite our differences. What an impact we would make for Jesus if outsiders saw us living as the brothers and sisters we are.

And then, imagine this...

On February 4, when Dr. John Perkins was with us, this eighty-seven-year-old son of Mississippi sharecroppers with a 3rd grade education, this author of 16 books and recipient of fourteen honorary doctorates told us, "*When we're loving each other, we're showing God to the world. We change the world by loving each other.*"

Dr. Perkins was urging us to be a church that welcomed people from all walks of life, a church that put aside what he called, "*all this 'foolishness' called 'race' and love everybody.*"

⁸ This helps to explain why the New Testament Jewish believers at times had such a hard time accepting the Gentiles into their fellowships.

He stood right where I'm standing and said, *"I'm saying what Ronald Reagan said when he was standing by that Berlin Wall, 'Tear down these walls between us' - and let us walk together."*

The Apostle Paul says that, in Christ, the walls separating the strands of humanity have been broken down. It is our job to keep them down and to not rebuild them.

The first church ever, the church in Jerusalem (Acts 2), gives us a wonderful model of fellowship, community, worship, prayer, teaching, and giving. There's lots to love about that church.

But it is in Antioch (Acts 13) that we see what it looks like when we follow a "walls-down" approach to church.

The church at Antioch was led by a VERY diverse group including a Levite (Barnabas), an African (Simeon), a Cyrenian (Lucius), a member of the Roman aristocracy (Manaen), and a former Pharisee (Saul).

THAT'S diversity. And THAT was the church that sent out Barnabas and Saul on the First Missionary Journey.

We have taken steps into a walls-down approach to church with the coming of Encuentro. Praise God for that - and you can look forward to a wonderful time of worship together - Spanish and English - in September.

Imagine how great it would be to take more steps into becoming an increasingly diverse church. Let's pray about this.⁹

Let's pray that we will...

...be able to serve the students who come to ESL classes and to citizenship classes with the Gospel;
 ...be allowed to serve as a home base for people from a language different than Spanish and English;
 ...become home to people from other nations and cultures;
 ...become increasingly diverse - ethnically, demographically, economically, politically,

When we are a diverse unity, serving and loving in Jesus' Name, God is glorified those who are far away will come near.

⁹ When I asked Dr. Perkins what might be the "next step" he would recommend for our church to take on the way to obeying Jesus' commands, he said, *"This is going to sound so small. But prayer is the way we discover God's will and direction for us."*