

ONE CHURCH

“His purpose was to create in himself one new man out of the two, thus making peace . . . ” (Eph 2:15)

The biggest division in the history of Christianity was between Jews and Gentiles. Words are not adequate to describe the profound depth of this hostility. From the Jewish point of view it was a matter of obedience to divine law. The Law of Moses contained repeated admonitions to have nothing to do with the Gentiles (Deut. 7:1 - 7 etc). Peter knew this and told Cornelius “you are well aware that it is against our law for a Jew to associate with a Gentile . . . ” (Acts 10:28). From the Gentile point of view there seems to be an inexplicable hatred for the Jews. Like Esau hated Jacob (Gen. 27:41), the Canaanites hated the Jews. Pharaoh hated the Jews. Hamaan hated the Jews. Hitler hated the Jews. The Muslims hate the Jews. Yet it was the plan of God from before the foundation of the world to abolish this hatred and unite Jews and Gentiles in Christ Jesus (Eph. 3:1 - 13). Jesus promised that there would ultimately be One Shepherd and One Fold (Jn. 10:16).

The difficulties in healing this division dominate the New Testament Scriptures. Large portions of the Acts and Epistles are devoted to this subject. The Jerusalem Council, the famine, the offering for the poor saints, the false teachers, the persecution, the call of Paul, the rebuke of Peter, and much more were an integral part of God’s plan to unite Jews and Gentiles. This remarkable unity would display God’s manifold wisdom to the principalities and powers in heavenly places (Eph. 3:10). Ultimately the whole universe will be united under Christ (Eph. 1:10).

For the sake of illustration, let us consider the different ways that Jews and Gentiles would consider the “church”. The Jews, no doubt, saw the church, or “ecclesia” in the light of the Septuagint (The Greek translation of the Hebrew Bible). The word is found some seventy times in this version and consistently referred to the nation of Israel as God’s “assembly”. It represents exclusively the Hebrew word “qahal”. The Hebrew word “edah” also referred to God’s assembly of the Hebrew people. Thus when Jesus promised His Jewish disciples that He would build His Church (ecclesia) it would be natural for to think of this word as they had always thought of it, an “assembly” of Israelites.

The word “ecclesia” was quite common in the Greek speaking world, but it came with a totally different set of associations. It can be traced in Greek literature as far back as five centuries before Christ. It referred to a popular assembly of competent full citizens by which the city was governed. The “ecclesia” opened with prayers and sacrifices to the gods of the city. Every citizen had a right to speak, propositions could be made upon the testimony of expert witnesses, and decisions were made by voting. Thus when the Gentiles heard that Jesus was going to build His Church (ecclesia), they would naturally think of this word as they had always thought of it.

Like new wine and old skins, the church of Jesus Christ did not fit in either the Jewish or Gentile mold. It was so radically different from anything they dreamed of that they would have to be born again in order to see it (John 3:3).

Perhaps the same situation presents itself today. Initially there were only two branches of Christianity, but today there are hundreds. Initially there was only one church in each city, today even little towns have more than one church. Some of this confusion obviously comes from the way that we look at the church. Like the ancient Jews and Gentiles, we see the same word with a totally different set of associations. Solving this dilemma requires a new dimension of thought. For example, all of our personal experience indicates that every time we drop a heavy object it falls. This is due to the “law of gravity”. All of our experience indicates that this is an inexorable law from which we cannot escape. Yet, a mere 100 miles from where you are now you can drop heavy object and it not fall, it will float motionless in the air. I refer, of course, to the experience of astronauts in orbit.

Yes! There is a solution to the damaging influence of a divided church, but it requires a new dimension of thought. It requires us to sit with Christ in heavenly places and see the church as He sees it. The One Church of which Christ is the Head is not composed to groups clustered together

in specific locations, but of truly converted individuals regardless of where they might be.