

Small Group Leaders Notes
Ephesians 2
November 2015

Small Group Leaders Notes

Ephesians 2:1-10

Introduction to our studies in Ephesians 2

During November we will be working through Ephesians chapter 2 on Sunday mornings. We studied Ephesians 1 earlier in 2015 and you can listen again to those sermons on the website (<http://bec.uk.net/resources/sermons/app/series/ephesians-1/page/1>). Over the five Sundays in November we will work through this incredible chapter where Paul explains to us how God, in his grace, has not only reconciled us to himself but also to one another. As a church this is a vital chapter for us to grapple with as it lays the theological foundations for what it means to be the people of God.

To help us apply the great truths of this chapter we are going to study Ephesians 2 in our small groups alongside Ken's sermons on Sunday mornings. The purpose of our studies will not be to rehash or critique Ken's sermons but to help us better apply what God is saying to us in Ephesians. As group leaders you will want to take these notes and questions and adapt them in light of Ken's sermons.

These studies in Ephesians 2 should hopefully reinforce and underpin many of the practical ideas that will have emerged from using 'Six Steps to Loving Your Church.' In many ways Ephesians 2 should provide the theological foundations for much of what 'Six Steps' was encouraging us to do as a church. Don't worry if there is overlap or repetition between that course and Ephesians 2. It is no bad thing to be reminded of the same things.

If you are looking for other books and commentaries to help you prepare then I would recommend the following;

Ephesians for you by Richard Coekin (<https://www.thegoodbook.co.uk/ephesians-for-you>)

The Message of Ephesians by John Stott (Bible Speaks Today - <https://www.thegoodbook.co.uk/the-message-of-ephesians>)

The Pillar New Testament Commentary: The Letter to the Ephesians by Peter O'Brien (<https://www.10ofthose.com/products/614/the-letter-to-the-ephesians/>)

The first two by Coekin and Stott are great resources designed for Bible study leaders and preachers. The commentary by O'Brien is more advanced and expensive but provides greater technical detail.

Context

- **1:1-14 - To the Praise of his glorious Grace**
 - In the opening section of chapter 1 Paul began with what Richard Coekin describes as “an explosion of praise.” The focus of this praise is God and his grace (see 1:3, 1:6, 1:14.)
 - Having praised God’s grace “that he lavished on us” Paul now returns to God’s grace in ch2 to show us exactly how God’s grace is central to our salvation (2:5, 2:7 - notice how the phrase “the riches of his grace is repeated from 1:6”, 2:8.)
 - God’s grace is one of the key themes running through the entire letter (see for example 1:2 , 3:2, 3:7, 4:7, 4:24.)

- **1:15-22 - Christ risen, ascended and exalted**
 - In the second part of chapter 1 Paul told the Ephesians what is prayer was for them. He prayed that they would know God better and know the hope and power that is theirs in and through Christ. He sketched out how the power that raised and exalted Christ from the grave is now at work in them (1:19-22).
 - Now in 2:1-6 Paul explains how God has raised believers from spiritual death to life with Christ. We were dead (v1, v5) but now we are alive in Christ (v5), raised with Christ (v6), and seated with Christ in the heavenly realms (v6.) Here is the power of God at work in the individual’s life as God raises them from spiritual death to life in Christ and exalting them with Christ as well! As Stott says “the sequence of thought is clear: ‘Jesus Christ was dead, but God raised and exalted him. And you also were dead, but God raised and exalted you with Christ.’”

- **1:10—> 2:1-22 - To bring unity to all things in heaven and on earth under Christ**
 - In many ways 1:10 provides a summary of the God’s great masterplan for the universe - “... to bring unity to all things in heaven and on earth under Christ.” This is God’s plan for the universe and chapter 2 shows us how this is being demonstrated in the local church.
 - First in 2:1-10 Paul shows us how God is reconciling and uniting us to Christ. Then in 2:11-22 he is showing us how we are being reconciled in Christ to one another. He takes the great division of Jews and Gentiles and shows how even this great hostility is being brought to peace and unity through the cross of Christ.
 - As we study chapter 2 we need to read it in the context of 1:10.

- **Romans 1-3 —> 2:1-5**
 - In Ephesians 2:1-5 Paul sketches out for us the bleak reality of humanity without Christ and then against such a black backdrop he paints the glorious riches of the grace of God to us in Christ. In this way Ephesians 2:1-5 acts as a shortened summary of Romans 1-3. The main difference is that in Romans 1-3 Paul unpacks the dark predicament of humanity in greater detail.

Structure and Content

• The Big Contrast

- V4 acts as a great pivot in these verses. In v1-3 Paul explains how everyone is by nature spiritually dead without Christ. Only once we have seen how terrible our plight is are we ready to be introduced the God's grace which comes in 2:4-10. Paul twice in chapter 2 Paul pivots from 'what we were' to 'what we are' by using of "But" (see v4 and v13.)
- Stott is worth quoting here;
"Paul first plumbs the depths of pessimism about man, and then rises to the heights of optimism about God. It is this combination of pessimism and optimism, of despair and faith, which constitutes the refreshing realism of the Bible. For what Paul does in this passage is to paint a vivid contrast between what man is by nature and what he can become by grace"

• 2:1-3 - We were Dead by Nature

• v1 - "... you were dead in your transgressions and sin"

- My guess is that Ephesians 2 is a very familiar passage for most of us therefore it is worth taking the time to think about what some of the key terms actually mean.
- **Dead**
 - Obviously Paul does not mean that we were physically dead (though Christ was in 1:20.) The sense here is that we were spiritually dead. We were spiritually dead because we were "seperated from the life of God" (4:18.) True life is found in God and we were alienated from him because of our transgressions and sin (more on them below) and so we were spiritually dead.
 - It is worth dwelling on this idea of being dead. Without Jesus Christ we are spiritual corpses and corpses can't do anything. They can't move, they can't hunger, they're dead! Without Jesus Christ we are spiritually lifeless. We are incapable of being hungry for God or moving towards God or searching for him because we're spiritually dead. When was the last time you saw a corpse moving or doing anything for that matter?
 - Here's a great quote from John Stott that helps us as we look at the world around us;

"So we should not hesitate to affirm that a life without God (however physically fit and mentally alert the person may be) is a living death, and that those who live it are dead even while they are living. To affirm this paradox is to become aware of the basic tragedy of fallen human existence. It is that people who were created by God and for God should now be living without God. Indeed, that was our condition until the Good Shepherd found us."

• Transgressions and sins

- We often think that these words are interchangeable and yet they emphasise slightly different things.
 - To transgress or trespass is to cross a boundary or deviate from a path.
 - To sin is to fall short or to miss the mark.
 - *"Together the two words cover the positive and negative, or active and passive, aspects of human wrongdoing, that is to say, our sins of commission and of omission. Before God we are both rebels and failures."* (Stott)

- **v2-3 - “the ways of this world... the ruler of the kingdom of the air... the cravings of our flesh...”**
 - In these verse we see that without Christ we are held captive by what Coekin describes as a “Trinity of Tyrants... [who] ensure that sinners cannot escape from their spiritual death.” These three tyrants are the world, the devil and the flesh. Again we may be familiar with these three tyrants but it is worth pausing to consider each in turn.
 - **The ways of this world World** - This means “*the cultural worldview of our sinful human race*” (Coekin.) We were incapable of thinking and therefore living differently from the world around us. As Phillips says “*We drifted along the stream of this world’s ideas of living.*” As Coekin puts it “*We can’t think outside this box any more than a jellyfish can think outside of the ocean.*”
 - **The Devil** - The ruler of the kingdom of the air may seem a confusing phrase which will we consider more fully under ‘**Tricky Bits.**’ For now as we consider the whole of v2 we can be clear that this figure is the Devil. We cannot deny the reality of Satan even if it brings mockery from our ‘enlightened’ society. The Bible affirms that he is real and he is active in every unbeliever tempting them to believe lies about God and his word.
 - **The cravings of the flesh** - This is not just our physical flesh but our whole human nature. We need to recognise that not all cravings are wrong and sinful. God created us with good cravings for sex, food and relationships etc. What we need to realise is that because of the fall our cravings are corrupted by sin. It is when our cravings become sinful and counter to God’s will that we have a problem. As non-Christians we were held captive by our sinful desires of the flesh.
- **v1-3 “As for you... All of us also lived among them...”**
 - In v1-2 Paul is addressing his Gentile readers in Ephesus stating that they were dead in their sins. But before the Ephesians start to feel picked on Paul shows that Jews such as himself are in exactly the same boat - “*All of us also...*” (v3.)
 - The human predicament is the same, we are all by nature dead in our sins and transgressions held captive by the world, the flesh and the devil.
- **v3 - “we were by nature deserving wrath”**
 - The consequence of all of this is spelt out for us in v3. We were by nature deserving of God’s wrath. By ‘God’s wrath’ we don’t mean that he loses his temper like us. Instead ‘God’s wrath’ refers to his settled, righteous hatred of evil. Paul wants us to feel the full force and terror of where we were - we were dead and we deserved God’s wrath! Only when we truly feel this darkness are we ready for the good news that’s coming...
- **2:4-10 - But now... We are Alive by Grace**
 - **What has God done?**
 - **Made us alive (v5)** - What a contrast with v1 where we were dead! Now we are alive! What is more God didn’t wait for us to begin to revive ourselves. He made us alive “*even when we were dead in transgressions.*”
 - **Saved us (v5 and v8)** - Twice Paul tells us that God has saved us by grace (more on grace below.) Remember it was not just that we were spiritually dead, we were also deserving of God’s wrath, yet now God has saved us.
 - **Raised us up (v6)** - Here the parallel with Jesus in 1:19-22 really begins to become clear. God has not only made us alive with Jesus but he has also raised us with Christ and...

- **Seated us in the heavenly realms (v6)** - Not only have we been raised with Christ but we are also seated with him in the heavenly realms (see Tricky Bits for more on this.) This means that as Christians we have 2 homes. As 1:1 puts it the Ephesians are “God’s holy people IN Ephesus...” but also “the faithful IN Christ Jesus.” We’re citizens both of Doncaster and of heaven because wherever Jesus is there we are also.
- **How has God done it?**
 - **“...With Christ”** - Read v4-10 and notice how many times the phrase “with Christ” or “in Christ” is used. I can count 5, how many can you count? Paul is making it clear that everything that God has done for us (making us alive, saving us, raising us and seating us in the heavenly realm) is all through Christ. Without Jesus we’d still be dead corpses, but with Christ we’re raised, saved, seated and alive!
- **Why has God done it?**
 - **“God’s love, mercy, kindness and grace”** - Paul wants us to be absolutely clear on why he has raised us from death to life. It is all because of God and his love for us (v4), his rich mercy (v4), his kindness (v7) and crucially his grace (v5, 7, 8.) We didn’t do anything to deserve this, again how could we, we were spiritual corpses? We could do nothing to merit anything but wrath from God.
 - **“To show the incomparable riches of his grace” (v7)** Here again there is a link between chapters 1 and 2. In 1:19-20 Paul told us that God raised Christ from the dead to show “the immeasurable greatness of his power.” Now in 2:7 Paul tells us that God raised us to show “the incomparable riches of his grace.” Stott uses the examples of a painter and a surgeon. The masterpiece displays the skill of the painter and the surgery displays the skill of the surgeon. Like a great masterpiece causes people to marvel at the artist so God’s people should cause people to marvel at the grace of our God who has raised dead people deserving his wrath to life!
- **Why is God’s grace so incomparably rich? (v8-10)**
 - That’s the question that is posed by v7 and so just in case we haven’t quite grasped why God’s grace is so amazing Paul now makes it clear in v8-10 by using several negatives.
 - **Not from yourselves - it is the gift of God (v8)** - Our faith and indeed our entire salvation come from God! It’s all from him. Look back over v1-7 and look at what we’ve contributed... “our transgressions and sins” in v1 - that’s it! Our salvation and life and status in Christ is all a gift, graciously given by God to be received by faith with empty hands.
 - **Not by works, so that no one can boast (v9)** - What salvation deserving good works could a corpse do? None! So God has not saved us because of any good things we might have done. When we see what we were really like without Jesus we realise that there’s no room for boasting.
 - **So is there no place for good works in the Christian life?** No, but they come after salvation and not before as v10 makes clear. We’re not saved by good works but we’re saved for good works! And yet even these come from God because God has prepared them in advance for us to do. Here we see that from first to last the Christian life is from God.

Tricky Bits

- **What does “the ruler of the kingdom of the air” mean? (v2)**
 - O’Brien helps us with this one when he says *“According to the ancient world-view, the air formed the intermediate sphere between earth and heaven. It was the dwelling place of evil spirits... The kingdom of the air, then, is another way of indicating the heavenly realm, which, according to Ephesians 6:12, is the abode of those principalities and powers, the world-rulers of this darkness and spiritual forces of wickedness, against which the people of Christ wage war.”*
- **What is “the heavenly realm”? (v6)**
 - This is a phrase that appears several times in Ephesians (see 1:3, 1:20-21, 3:10, 6:12.) It is the spiritual realm where Satan and his forces (6:12) as well as God exists. It is also the arena in which we have been blessed with every spiritual blessing in Christ (1:3.) It is also where Christ now reigns supreme (1:20-21) and where God shows off his wisdom by displaying the church to his beaten foes (3:10.)

Big Idea

We were dead **by nature**, *but now* we are alive **by grace**.

Some Suggested Applications

- 1. Have an honest view of ourselves and other people**
 - None of us like to think of ourselves as spiritually dead and deserving of God’s wrath. If we’ve been Christians for a long time it can be easy to forget just what we were like and to assume that we could do something to save ourselves. We will only celebrate God’s grace when we see the depths from which he has saved us.
 - Similarly we need to let this passage shape how we see the world around us. People without Christ are spiritually dead and deserve God’s wrath. They may seem alive and decent but we need to listen to what God’s word has to say.
- 2. Eliminate all pride in ourselves and celebrate God’s grace to us**
 - Only as we see that salvation is entirely from God will we be freed from boasting and celebrate God’s grace. The more we see how wretched and hopeless we were without Christ, the more we will be captivated by God’s grace to us.
- 3. Transform even the most mundane things we do into worship and service of God**
 - v10 shows us that our good works play no part in saving us. Instead God saves us to do the good works that he has prepared for us to do. This should revolutionise how we think about our day-to-day lives and the seemingly mundane things we do. God is directing our lives and presenting us with all sorts of opportunities to serve him.

A Suggested Bible Study

Starter Question

1. This study is all about the radical transformation that being united to Jesus brings. To get us started, can you think of other examples of radical transformation? What changed and who was responsible?

This starter question is designed to be a simple way to get people thinking and talking. There are no right or wrong answers so everyone should be able to get involved without fear of giving "the wrong answer." We want to think about who was responsible for the change and therefore who deserved the credit for the change. This will set up the rest of the study where we see that God deserves all the credit for the radical change that has occurred in Christians. We've contributed nothing but our sin and transgressions so we've got nothing to boast about.

Digging into v1-3

2. What were we all like without Jesus?

Here we want the group to pick out the different words and phrases used to describe what we were all like. This is a simple observation question - tell the group to just say what they see even if they don't understand some of the terms. Crucially we were;

- *Dead - spiritually not physically (this may need explaining)*
- *Followed the ways of the world (again this might want unpacking)*
- *Satan was at work in us*
- *Gratifying the cravings of our flesh (again you might need to unpack this.)*
- *We all deserved God's wrath*

Applying v1-3

3. How do these verses help us to understand ourselves and our society?

For those of us who have been Christians a long time these verses remind us exactly what we were like without Jesus. We were spiritual corpses just going with the flow of society. We deserved God's wrath and there was absolutely nothing that we could do to change that! These verses really do paint a bleak picture of us and our society and this is really important because without the bleakness of v1-3 we'll not really appreciate the amazing light of v4-10.

Digging into v4-10

4. What has God done for us through Jesus?

Again this is an observation question where we are encouraging the group to pull out all the different things that are mentioned. Once they have done this you may want to get them to summarise the transformation that has taken place;

- *Death —> Life*
- *Saved*
- *Raised up*
- *seated in the heavenly realms*
- *Prepared good works for us to do*
- *All of this is with/in Christ*

5. Why would God do this for people like us who deserve his wrath?

In a sense this is probably the crucial question. When we see just what we were like in v1-3 it is all the more amazing that God who intervene to save us and give us life. Help the group to draw out the different reasons why God has acted;

- *Because of his great love for us*
- *God is rich in mercy*

- *his grace (x3)*
- *his kindness*
- *So that in the coming ages he might show the incomparable riches of his grace (this may need unpacking. In particular you might want to think about why it is right for God to use us to show off his grace?)*

Applying v4-10

6. In what ways do you find boasting slipping into your Christian life?

We have seen that the radical transformation in us is all down to God. We're his handiwork. Even the good works that we now do as Christians have been prepared for us by God. There really is no room for boasting and yet secretly we can boast/take pride in who we are or what we've done as Christians. It's good for us as a group to acknowledge and confess that. Studying this passage should show us how ridiculous it is for us to boast.

7. How does this passage squash such boasting and cause us to celebrate God's grace?

This question flows out of the previous question. Paul wants us to praise God for his grace (see chapter 1). Take the time as a group to ponder God's grace afresh. This might be a familiar passage and the concept of God's grace may be very familiar to us but let's not lose the wonder of God's grace to us. The radical transformation that has been brought about in us is all due to God's grace!

8. Think of some of the boring and mundane things you will do this week. How could v10 transform your attitude to these things?

v10 helps us to see that everything we do has meaning and purpose because God prepares good works for us to do. This means that even mundane things like cooking, washing-up, the school run, filing, dog walking are opportunities to serve God as part of our worship and thanks to him for his grace!

Small Group Leaders Notes

Ephesians 2:11-13

Context

- **God's plan "to bring unity to all things in heaven and on earth under Christ." (1:10)**
 - 1:10 provides us with a summary of God's big plan for the universe. For this to happen we need to not only be united to God but also to one another. Paul has address the first part of this in 2:1-10 as he has explained how God has raised us from death to life by uniting us with Christ. Now in 2:11-22 he will explain how through Christ we are reconciled not only to God but also to each other as God brings unity where previously there was division.
- **Parallels between 2:1-10 and 2:11-22**
 - The basic structure of the 2 main parts of chapter 2 are similar. In both sections Paul starts by reminding us of what we were like without Christ (2:1-3 and 2:11-12.) Having done this he then shows us the transformation that has been brought about through our unity with Christ (2:4-10 and 2:13-18). In both cases he uses the word 'But' as a hinge turning from what we were to what we are (see (2:4 "But because..." and 2:13 "But now...")
- **The 'Far off' being brought near in Isaiah 49:6 and 57:19**
 - In our short little section for this study Paul shows us where we were as Gentiles (summed up by the phrase "far away" in v13) and where we now are as Christians ("brought near by the blood of Christ.") In v14-22 Paul will expand on how God has brought us near and why he would do such a thing for people like us.
 - For now it is important to notice that v13 draws on Old Testament verses from Isaiah 49:6 and 57:19. In Isaiah 49 God is addressing his servant saying that it will be too small a thing for his servant to "bring back those of Israel I have kept. I will also may you a light for the Gentiles, that my salvation may reach to the ends of the earth." Here we see that it had always been God's intention to bring salvation to all nations and to gather in not only Jews but Gentiles as well.
 - Similarly in 47:19 God says that peace will be cleared both "to those far and near."
- **The historical context of the division between Jews and Gentiles**
 - It is hard to fully grasp the hostility and division that there was between Jews and Gentiles. William Barclay helps us to begin to feel what the relationship was like;

"The Jew had an immense contempt for the Gentile. The Gentiles, said the Jews, were created by God to be fuel for the fires of hell. God, they said, loves only Israel of all the nations that he had made ... It was not even lawful to render help to a Gentile mother in her hour of sorest need, for that would simply be to bring another Gentile into the world. Until Christ came, the Gentiles were an object of contempt to the Jews. The barrier between them was absolute. If a Jewish boy married a Gentile girl, or if a Jewish girl married a Gentile boy, the funeral of that Jewish boy or girl was carried out. Such contact with a Gentile was the equivalent of death."

Structure

- **Remember where you were... (v11-12)**

- **Remember** - Twice in just 3 verses we are told to “Remember.” Here is the big thing that Paul wants us to do! We are to remember where we were as Gentiles. Paul doesn’t just want us to remember that we were non-Christians, he wants us to remember that we were Gentile Non-Christians. Being Gentile non-Christians meant six things that Paul mentions in v11-13.

1. **Separate from Christ** - This is obviously true of all non-believers but we need to remember that Paul is speaking to us as “Gentiles.” As Gentile non-believers we were separate from Christ in a different way to Jewish people. Christ was the Jewish Messiah, the King of Israel. As Gentile non-believers there was no sense in which Christ was our king and so we had no right to any of the blessings that come from living under his rule.
2. **Excluded from Citizenship in Israel** - As Gentiles it wasn’t just that we didn’t have Jewish passports. To be a citizen of Israel came with incredible privileges. As Gentiles we had no right to know God, we didn’t have his perfect ethical law, similarly we had no access to God through the temple. Gentiles were only allowed into the outer court of the temple and could not enter further in on pain of death.
3. **Foreigners to the Covenants of the Promise** - It is important to notice that it says “covenants” not just “covenant.” As Richard Coekin says’

“God made one marvellous gospel promise to Abraham, that the and his descendants would enjoy the blessings of God’s Kingdom (Genesis 12:1-3), which was amplified periodically by covenant arrangements revealed progressively throughout the history of God’s people.”

For example; to Moses God promised that those who kept his law would be blessed (Exodus 19:5-6.) To Phinehas God promised that there would always be a priest to mediate between God and his people (Numbers 25:10-13.) Then to David he promised that one of David’s descendants would reign over God’s kingdom for ever (2 Samuel 7:11-16). Then to Jeremiah God promised a new covenant whereby God’s people’s sins would be forgiven, they’d know him and be enabled to serve and obey him (Jeremiah 31:31-34.) All of these covenant promises are Jesus’ by right because he alone perfectly kept the covenant stipulations that God laid down. We can benefit in the blessings of the covenants of promise only through Christ who now shares the blessings that are his by right with us Gentiles who deserve nothing by right.

4. **Without Hope** - All that we have said so far means that as Gentiles we had no hope. That doesn’t mean that as Gentiles we didn’t have hopes and aspirations. It just meant that we had no hope in the face of death. We had no hope of being reconciled to God. We had no hope of being free from the curse. We had no hope of once again enjoying God’s blessing!
5. **Without God** - Again, many gentiles had gods but they did not know the one true God. Although he had revealed himself by general revelation in creation they had no true knowledge of him. We were cut off from him and had no

relationship with him and therefore ultimately we had no meaning or purpose in life. Though we desperately tried to fill that void with idols such attempts were futile.

6. Far Away - In v13 Paul summarises where we were as Gentiles with this simple phrase - "Far away." We were not only far away from God's people but also far away from God! Not just in some geographical or social sense but spiritually. Hendrickson sums up our state as Gentile non-believers by saying we were "*Christless, stateless, friendless, hopeless and Godless.*" This is what Paul wants us to remember. He doesn't want us to lose sight of this because if we lose sight of where we were then our appreciation and delight at where we now are in Christ will grow dim.

• ... **So that you will love where you are now in Christ! (v13)**

- **Brought Near** - At this stage in v13 this phrase may seem a bit mysterious, to whom have we been brought near? As we read on into v14-18 we see that not only have Gentiles been brought near to God (v16-18) but we have also been brought near to Jewish believers. Now Gentile believers and Jewish believers are one new humanity! More of that next time. For now the amazing news is that those of us who were rightly far away have been brought near. We're no longer hopeless foreigners, we're citizens of God's kingdom will all the blessings, privileges and hope that this brings!
- **In Christ Jesus** - This phrase signifies the personal union that we now experience as Christians. It is through being in Christ that we are reconciled to God. We have been brought near to God in Christ. Here in a phrase is what happens at conversion - we're in Christ and so we're brought near to God.
- **By the blood of Christ** - Christ has died for our sins which alienated us from God. The reason we can be brought near is that Christ died for us on the cross. While we were still far off, Christ died for us so that we might be included in him and brought to God. The cross makes the reconciliation that we experience at conversion possible.

Tricky Bits

- **What does Paul mean by 'uncircumcised' and 'the circumcised'? Why does he point out that circumcision is done in the body by human hands?**
 - Circumcision was the symbol God gave to Israel that they were his covenant people. It symbolised how they were to be cut off from sin. The mark of circumcision was supposed to remind them that as God's covenant people they were meant to be a blessing to the nations. Israel had taken circumcision as a badge of honour that distinguished them as the chosen people from the Gentiles who were outside God's people.
 - In v11 Paul is therefore talking as a religious Jew would have spoken, boasting that he carried the mark of belonging to God's covenant people and looking down on the gentile who didn't. Before his conversion this is exactly how Paul would have thought of himself and Gentiles but not any more.
 - In becoming a Christian Paul had come to recognise that having the outward/physical mark of circumcision was of no value in and of itself without the inner spiritual circumcision of the heart that was only possible by the Spirit.
 - The big point in these verses is that Paul wants to make is to remind Gentile believers of how they were far away from God and his people. In v11 when he comments that circumcision is just done by human hands in the flesh he is taking a moment just to

make a secondary point which is that the circumcision that his fellow Jews boasted in was not as big a deal as they thought. It was only a physical sign that needed to be accompanied with an inner spiritual reality that was now open to both Jews and Gentiles.

Big Idea

- **Remember where you were so that you will love where you are now in Christ!**

Suggested Applications

- **Remember where you were ... and give thanks**
 - *If studying this passage doesn't cause us to praise God for what he has done for us then something has gone wrong. The key to studying this passage with a group is to really help them to feel the utter hopelessness of where we were without Christ. If we do this then we will want to rejoice and praise him for his mercy to us in Christ!*
- **Remember where they are... and do all you can for them**
 - *What was true of us is still true of so many around us. Again if this passage doesn't drive us to our neighbors to weep and pray for those without Christ then something has gone wrong.*
- **Think about what this means for church**
 - As Gentiles we are not part of God's people by rights. We're not Christians by birth. We were far off and only the blood of Christ could bring us near. This should humble us and make us those who are quick to reach out and welcome those who are separate from Christ and hopeless just as we were.

Suggested Bible Study

Starter Question

- 1. Think of the recent Refugee Crisis. How do the images that we have seen make us feel? What words would you use to describe those people and their situation?**

The reason for starting like this is that when we see the refugees we see people who are homeless and helpless. They foreigners with no hope and so they are a powerful picture of who we were without Christ. By spending some time thinking of them it should set up our study.

Digging into the Passage

- 2. Paul says that as Gentiles we were far off.**

- 1. What did this mean?**
- 2. Why was it so bad?**

These questions should ease us into the passage. Some of the phrases in v11-12 may need some helpful explanation but hopefully everyone should be able to understand the broad sense of what Paul is saying.

- 3. What does Christ do for us when we become Christians?**

- 1. What does it mean for us to have been brought near?**

Here the aim is for us to see that not only have we been brought near to God, we've also been brought near to a diverse group of people that now make up the people of God.

Applying the Passage

- 4. How does this passage make us feel, pray and act for those we know who aren't Christians?**

A vital application of this passage is to pray for those we know and love who are still far off. Make sure you leave enough time to share the names of people who are particularly on our hearts and to pray for them. It would also be good to talk practically and encourage one another to be reaching out appropriately to these people.

- 5. How does this passage make us want to praise God for what he has done for us in Christ?**

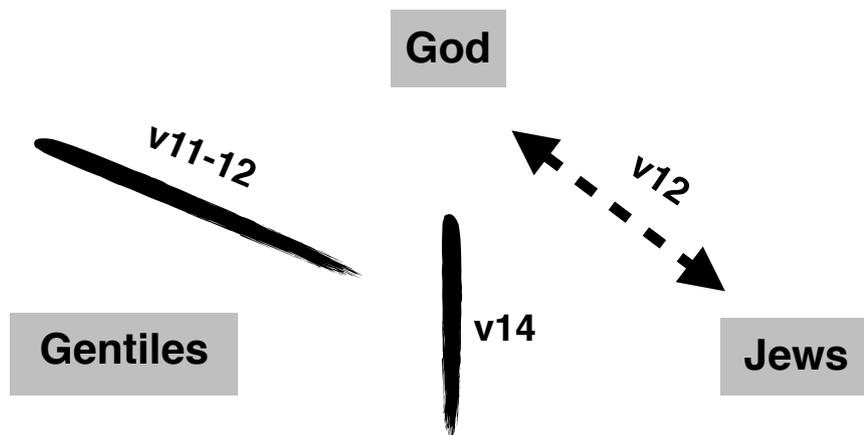
Again it would be good to spend time praising God for what he has done for us in Christ. This might be incredibly familiar to us but it should still warm our hearts and cause us great joy - we were far off but we've been brought near! Hallelujah!

Small Group Leaders Notes Ephesians 2:14-18

Context

• *Ephesians*

- **1:10** - Here is a key verse for understanding Ephesians. God's plan is to unite everything under Christ. History is not circular, it is linear and it is heading to this climax. In Ephesians 2:14-18 we see how God is uniting everything on earth (Jew and Gentile being the greatest division) under Christ.
- **2:11-13** - We can summarise how things were between Jews and Gentiles and Gentiles and God without Christ by using **Diagram 1** (all three diagrams are taken from Graham Boynton's book God's New Community p25, 27 and 29.)
 - Jews and God - Before Christ the Jews did have something of a special relationship with God. In v12 Paul talks about "citizenship in Israel" and how the Jews as God's people had the covenants of promise.
 - Gentiles and God - The big point of v11-12 is that Gentiles do not have a relationship with God. There was a barrier separating them from God because they were "excluded from citizenship in Israel."
 - Gentiles and Jews - Now in v14 Paul shows us that there was a great social divide between Jews and Gentiles. The Jews considered the Gentiles as unclean dogs and if a Jewish Son married a Gentile then his family would not only disown him, they would hold his funeral! He was literally dead to them. No wonder Paul talks of "the barrier, the dividing wall of hostility." It is only as we appreciate these divides that we will then appreciate what Christ has achieved at the cross in reconciling people to God and to each other.



(Diagram 1 - Relationship before Christ)

• *Genesis 11:1-9*

- The theme of division between people is found throughout the Bible. Ever since Genesis 3 there has been division between people and God (Genesis 3:23-24) and between people (Genesis 3:7, 12, 16.) This is seen vividly in Genesis 11 where people band together to build a great tower "that reaches to the heavens, so that we will make a name for ourselves." They are seeking to put themselves in God's place

and so God acts in judgment to confuse their language and scatter them across the earth. In the light of Genesis 11 we see that the division we experience in the world today is ultimately a result of human sin and God's righteous judgment. The good news is that Christ has borne the judgment we deserve to bring peace and unity.

- **Isaiah 52:7**

- Isaiah says "How beautiful on the mountains are the feet of those who bring good news, who proclaim peace, who bring good tidings, who proclaim salvation..." We rightly apply this verse to those involved in evangelism and world mission and yet in light of Ephesians 2:17 it applies first and foremost to Christ who came and preached peace to both Jew and Gentile in fulfillment of Isaiah's prophecy.

- **Revelation 7:9-10**

- In Revelation we get a picture of what it will be like when God unites all things in heaven and on earth under Christ (Ephesians 1:9-10.) Here we see a great multitude from every corner of the globe united together in worshipping God. Here is where history is heading, indeed here is where the church, our church is heading! This is God's plan, his desire for his people. The question is the extent to which our church reflects something of this diversity and unity now?

Structure

As always it is worth looking out for the connecting words such as "for" "by" "thus". These help us to understand what Christ has done, why he has done it and how he has done it. Why not write out the passage and underline or highlight these words. Similarly notice how Christ is the subject of all the sentences in this passage. To help you see what Christ has done I have gathered the different things under 2 headings; The Destructive work of Christ and the Constructive work of Christ.

- **Title - "For he himself is our peace" (v14)**

- This phrase stands as a summary and a title for this small section. Notice how the theme of peace runs throughout the verses and is mentioned in v14, 15, 17 (x2).
- The word "For" reminds us that whilst this is a new study for us it is closely related to what we saw in the last study. In v13 we were told that in Christ Jesus Gentiles who were far away had been brought near by the blood of Christ. Now in v14 we get the explanation and the reason for this. We have been brought near because Christ is our peace, he's made the two groups one and has destroyed the dividing wall of hostility that was between Jew and Gentile.
- As we will see in the following verses Jesus not only brings peace between different groups of people, he also brings peace with God (See v15-16 and diagrams 2 and 3.)
- Notice too that Christ is "our peace". Christ doesn't just bring peace or proclaim peace - he is peace. He's the Prince of Peace from Isaiah 9:6.) We only have peace with God and each other in him.

- **The Destructive work of Christ**

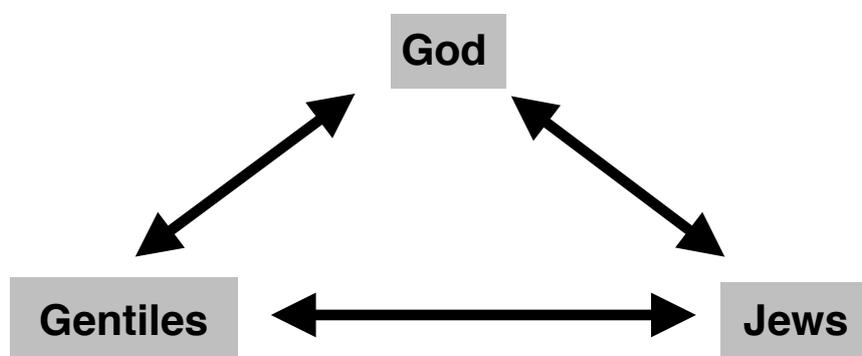
- **"Destroyed the Barrier..." (v14)**

- The picture Paul draws for us is of Jews and Gentiles divided by a wall or a fence (see Diagram 1.) The question is whether this refers to the literal dividing wall in the Jerusalem temple or to the social division between Jews and Gentiles or

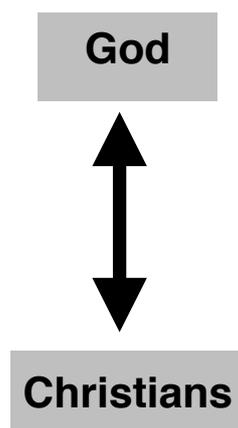
whether it refers to the law which is mentioned in the following phrase in v15. See the **Tricky Bits** below for a discussion on this.

- However we understand this picture the message is clear - Jesus has destroyed the barrier - all that separated Jew and Gentile has been brought down by Christ! Before all things on earth can be united under Christ the things that divide them need to be removed and that is what Christ has done.
- *“By setting aside in his flesh the law...” (v15)*
 - The phrase “by setting aside” could be translated “by abolishing”. Again this is potentially tricky to understand because in Matthew 5:17 Jesus says that “I have not come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfil them. Again see the **Tricky Bits** for how we reconcile these two verses.
- *“... Put to death their hostility” (v16)*
 - At the cross Jesus not only killed the hostility between warring people, he also killed the hostility between us and God. At the cross Jesus breaks down/kills all the barriers that we saw in Diagram 1.
- **The Constructive work of Christ**
 - *“Made the two groups one...” (v14)*
 - Jesus doesn’t just pull down the barriers between us and then leave it up to us to come together. Instead having pulled down the divide between Jew and Gentile he then positively makes us 1.
 - *“If Jews spoke of humanity being divided into Jews and Gentiles, then Paul makes a threefold division: Jews, Greeks (i.e., Gentiles), and the church of God (1 Cor. 10:32). Later Christians were to speak of themselves as a third race or new race neither Jewish nor Gentile.” (O’Brien)*
 - *“His purpose was to create in himself one new humanity out of the two, thus making peace” (v15)*
 - At the centre of our passage in v15-16 Paul makes Jesus’ purpose explicit. Jesus went to the cross so that he might create a new humanity and unite this new humanity to God. This means that the cross has not just achieved Diagram 2 but has actually gone further to accomplish Diagram 3.
 - This is important because it means that Gentiles do not have to become Jews nor do Jews have to become Gentiles. This is not unity by conformity or by assimilation. This is unity by integration. The church was not to be Jewish or Gentile, it was to be Christian, multi-ethnic, multi-racial and multi-cultural. No group is being asked to conform to another group. Instead all are to become something new in Christ - Christian. This identity as Christian (in Christ) transcends all other identities. In our applications we need to explore this further for what this means for our church - all of us are called upon to leave behind our previous identities to embrace our new identity in Christ. There is no sense of “them” joining “us” or “us” joining “them.”
 - Graham Beynon uses the illustration of the British and Irish lions in Rugby. For most of the time the Welsh, English, Scottish and Irish players are enemies fighting (sometimes literally) against each other. Yet once every four years they take off their old shirts (English, Irish, Welsh and Scottish) and put on their new shirt (The Lions.) The former identity (English) is now secondary to their identity as the Lions. It is not that the Scottish, Welsh and Irish players all have to play for England and put on English shirts. Instead they all leave behind their old shirts to wear the one new shirt.

- *“Nothing less than a new creation, an entirely new entity, was needed to transcend the deep rift between the two. It was effected through Christ’s death, and the result is not an amalgam of the best elements of the two, but a ‘new person’ who transcends them both. The new humanity is not achieved by transforming Gentiles into Jews, or vice versa.”* O’Brien
- *“Reconcile both of them to God through the cross...”* (v16)
 - Now we see that Jews as well as Gentiles needed to be reconciled to God (that is why in Diagram 1 the arrow is only a dotted line whereas in the other diagrams it is solid.) There isn’t one way to God for Gentiles and a different way for Jews. Jesus is the only way for everyone. There’s 1 door, 1 path up the mountain etc.
- *“He came and preached peace...”* (v17)
 - This further emphasises how both Jew and Gentile can only have peace with God through Jesus. The reason for this is made clear in v18 (notice the “for”.) Whoever we are there is only one way to have access to the Father and that is through the Son and by the Spirit.
 - The Trinitarian allusion in v18 is significant when we consider what Paul is saying about the church in these verses. Father, Son and Spirit are 1, they are perfectly united and yet distinct. The Father, is not the Son, nor is he the Spirit etc. God the Trinity is a perfect Unity in Diversity. He is not Unity in Sameness/Conformity. As the church God’s people are to reflect God’s Unity in Diversity. Jews are not to force Gentiles to become Jews, nor are Gentiles to force Jews to become Gentiles. In each case that would be unity by conformity whereas what Jesus has achieved at the cross is a unity in diversity as Jew and Gentile become Christian.



(Diagram 2 - Relationship after Christ)



(Diagram 3 - True Relationship after Christ)

Tricky Bits

- ***What is the barrier? (v14)***

- Stott identifies this barrier as symbolising the Gentile alienation from God and Jews. Stott says that;

“This announcement which Paul makes of the breaking down of the wall by Jesus Christ is extremely remarkable. For literally and historically speaking, the wall was not broken down until the Roman legions entered Jerusalem in ad 70. So it was still standing, still surrounding the temple, and still excluding the Gentiles, while Paul was writing this letter. But though materially it remained, spiritually it had already been destroyed in ad 30 or so, when Jesus died on the cross. As Armitage Robinson put it, ‘It still stood: but it was already antiquated, obsolete, out of date, so far as its spiritual meaning went. The sign still stood: but the thing signified was broken down.’”

- In response to this suggestion O’Brien questions whether the Gentile readers of Ephesus would have recognised such an allusion. He argues that the barrier really refers to the Mosaic Law. He argues this because he sees the two phrases “has destroyed the barrier, the dividing wall of hostility,” and “by setting aside in his flesh the law with its commands and regulations” as running parallel to each other. He argues that the law “separated Jews from Gentiles both religiously and sociologically, and caused deep-seated hostility. The enmity which was caused by the Jews separateness was often accompanied by a sense of superiority on their part.”
- As usual I wouldn’t get too bogged down in this. All I would say is that how you understand the first part of v15 (see our next Tricky Bit) will shape how you understand this issue in v14.
- ***In what sense did Jesus set aside the law?” (v15)***
 - As mentioned earlier Jesus said that he hadn’t come to abolish the law and yet here is Paul saying that Jesus has set aside/abolished the law. How are we to understand this?
 - Lots has been written on this but Stott seems the most helpful. He makes the point that Jesus and Paul are referring to the law in two different senses.

“In the Sermon on the Mount the context shows that Jesus was referring to the moral law. He was teaching the difference between Pharisaic righteousness and Christian righteousness, and urging that Christian righteousness involves a deep and radical obedience to the law. Paul’s primary reference here, however, seems to be to the ceremonial law and to what neb calls ‘its rules and regulations’, that is, to circumcision (the main physical distinction between Jews and Gentiles, verse 11), the material sacrifices, the dietary regulations and the rules about ritual ‘cleanness’ and ‘uncleanness’ which governed social relationships.”

- O'Brien argues something slightly different. He argues that the Law was associated closely with the Sinai Covenant that God had with Israel. O'Brien therefore argues that Jesus abolished the law in the sense of replacing the Sinai Covenant with the New Covenant that God makes through Christ with both Jew and Gentile.
- Whichever way you go focus on the big point of the passage which comes in v15 - "his purpose was to create in himself one new humanity..."
- ***How did Jesus preach peace to the Ephesians? (v17)***
 - Jesus didn't go to Ephesus so in what sense can Paul say that "He came and preached to you who were far away"?
 - Paul can say this in the sense that through his Spirit empowered Apostle (Paul), Christ had come and preached to them. As Jesus sends his Apostles out on mission he tells them "surely I am with you always to the very end of the age." As the gospel of reconciliation in Christ is faithfully proclaimed by his people there is a sense in which it is Christ who is speaking to people through his people by his Spirit.

Big Idea

In Christ enemies are united to each other and to God!

Suggested Application

- **Diversity in the church is not an optional extra, it was Jesus' purpose at the cross. Does BEC reflect the social, ethnic, economic, educational and class diversity of Bessacarr and Doncaster?**
 - Jesus' purpose in going to the cross was to create in himself one new humanity where all the old divisions and barriers are no more! What is more history is heading to the day when a great multitude from every people, tribe, language and nation will gather around the throne. In the light of these two great events of history our local church should be made up of a diverse group of people reflecting the diversity of people found in our town and community. It would be worth thinking about whether or not BEC reflects the diversity of Bessacarr. You can find a some of the 2011 census data online (<http://bessacarr-and-cantley.localstats.co.uk/census-demographics/england/yorkshire-and-the-humber/doncaster/bessacarr-and-cantley>) and you might like to compare this picture of Bessacarr and BEC.
- **What are the big divisions in our church? How are we to understand them in light of this passage? How can we be better at living out and expressing the unity that we have in Christ?**
 - The issue of Jew/Gentile division is not an issue for BEC yet we need to remember that God is uniting all things in heaven and earth under Christ. This means that the church is to be a place where all previous barriers and divisions are brought down. Historically British society has been divided along class lines, do we see something of this in BEC? Are there divisions between young and old? Families and those without families? Spend some time thinking about how we as a church can practically do a better job of expressing our unity and our new identity in Christ. Being Christian now trumps all the other labels that we had.

- **Unity by assimilation (making people become like us if they want to be part of our church) will always be easier and more comfortable than what Paul is talking about here. In what ways do we expect people who join BEC to adapt to our predominately white, british, middle class culture and way of doing church? Do we inadvertently give off this impression? If so, how?**
- Think back to the British Lions Rugby illustration from before. Do we expect people from different cultures and backgrounds to put on our shirt? Think about how someone who doesn't speak English would feel at one of our services? Do we expect people to behave or dress like us in order to belong to BEC?

Suggested Bible Study

Starter Questions

1. What do you think are some of the big divisions in our society today?

This starter question is designed to get people thinking and talking around the idea of division and hostility. We often hear of how our society is divided along social, ethnic, religious, and class lines. Talking about some of these will help us to begin to see the relevance of what Christ is doing in creating in himself one new humanity.

Digging into the Passage

2. What was the relationship between Jews, Gentiles and God like before Christ?

This question recaps what we saw last time in v11-13. If you want you could ask the group to have a go at drawing the relationship along the lines of the diagrams above. You could give them the attached Template (see below) and ask them to have a go at completing it based on v11-14. However you do it you want the group to see that there was division between Jew and Gentile and between God and Gentile. Don't get too bogged down over the exact relationship between God and Jew, at this point it is not Paul's focus.

3. What is the relationship between Jews, Gentiles and God like now in Christ?

Here you are encouraging the group to see both the destructive work of Christ and the constructive work of Christ (see the notes above.) Again you might like to do this by use of diagrams. You could give them the same template below and ask them to redraw the diagram showing the difference that Christ makes. You could then show them diagrams 2 and 3 above to help them see how Jew and Gentile are actually now a new humanity/ group called Christian.

4. How has Christ achieved all of this?

Here we want to draw out that Christ has achieved this by his death at the cross (v16.) It is not just that Jesus gives us peace - he is our peace and he has come to all proclaiming a message of peace with one another and with God that is only possible in him! Don't get too bogged down about how he abolishes the law instead focus on the fact that it is only through the cross that true unity can be found.

You might like to think about all the different ways that humans try to bring down barriers and create unity. You might like to think about how and why these ultimately will not work? Think about why it is that only Christ can bring true and lasting unity.

Applying the Passage

5. Based on these verses, what sort of church does Jesus want BEC to be? What would this look like?

Jesus wants BEC to be a church where all sorts of different people from different cultures and backgrounds come together in unity in him. This isn't to be a unity where the majority force the minority to conform and become like the majority. Instead it is one where our identity as Christians trump all our other labels and identities. Spend some time as a group thinking about what this would be like whilst recognising that we will never experience this perfect unity until we're in the new creation.

6. In what ways does BEC reflect the social, ethnic and educational diversity of Doncaster? In what ways do we not reflect this diversity? How can we be better at welcoming and including those who are not like us?

This might be a tough question to discuss and it isn't designed to encourage moaning or smugness. Instead hopefully it is a change for us to honestly and humbly talk about an important and yet often taboo subject. How you lead the discussion at this point will be really key. We want to do so sensitively whilst continuing to keep people coming back to the passage.

7. Are there any noticeable divisions within BEC? Practically how could we be better at living out our unity in Christ?

As with the previous question this may be a tough question to answer. Again it is also not meant to be an opportunity for people to moan. Instead try and steer the conversation towards the positive things that each of us can do to better live out our unity.

(Template)

God

Jews

Gentiles

Small Group Leaders Notes

Ephesians 2:19-22

Context

- ***Ephesians 1:10***

- As we keep saying this is a key verse for understanding the letter of Ephesians and particularly chapter 2. God's plan is to unite all things in heaven and on earth under Christ. Each local church is to be a foretaste and advert for this as all sorts of different people are brought together in unity in Christ.

- ***Ephesians 2:11-18***

- Our passage comes as the climax of chapter 2. Note how v19 begins with the word "Consequently." Paul has shown us how Jew and Gentile are now reconciled to one another and to God through Christ. All Christians have access to God through the Christ by the one Spirit. In v19-22 Paul now wants his Gentile readers to be clear on what that means for them.

- ***Ephesians 3:1-21***

- Although 2:19-22 is the climax of ch2 we shouldn't think that Paul has moved on to something completely different at the start of ch3. Remember that the chapter divisions and the titles in our Bibles are not original. When Paul wrote Ephesians there was no break between 2:22 and 3:1. Notice how 3:1 begins with "For this reason..." Paul wants us to see that what he is going to pray for the Ephesians in chapter 3 (see v14-21) flows out of what he has said about them in chapter 2. It is because they are now fellow citizens with God's people and also members of his household, being built together to become a dwelling in which God lives by his Spirit that Paul prays that "out of his glorious riches he may strengthen you with power through his Spirit in your inner being, so that Christ may dwell in your hearts by faith..." (3:16-17)

- ***The Dwelling of God***

- Paul picks up the image of the temple as the dwelling place of God so it is important to remember the progression of this through the Bible story. When God chose Israel he dwelling amongst them was symbolised by the tabernacle and then the grand temples of Solomon, Zerubbabel's and then Herod's. God had promised that he would dwell with his people and where sacrifices would be made. Ultimately this promise was fulfilled not in a building but in a person - the God man, Jesus Christ. In Christ God tabernacled/dwelt among us (John 1:14) and on the cross he offered the ultimate sacrifice for sins in his body (John 1:36.) Now united by faith with Christ, and filled by his Spirit God's people both individually and corporately are God's dwelling place. We will explore this further below.

Structure

In these verses Paul employs four images of the church which each bring out something different. John Stott identifies them as God's Kingdom (v19a), God's Family (v19b) and God's Temple (v20-22) and we will use this to consider these verses.

- **We are now Citizens in God's Kingdom (v19a)**

- Back in 2:12 Paul told us that without Christ, we (Gentiles) were excluded from citizenship in Israel and foreigners to the covenants of promise. Yet now because of what Christ has done (v14-18) we're no longer foreigners we're citizens of God's Kingdom. We were homeless but now we have a home.
- As Richard Coekin puts it *"we're not illegal immigrants dodging the border guards, but "fellow citizens" of heaven, enjoying an eternal freedom to remain, passports stamped with the King's blood..."*. We're now primarily citizens of heaven but for now we're travelling away from home in foreign lands. As Paul puts it in 1:1 we're "God's holy people in Ephesus/Doncaster, the faithful IN Christ Jesus."
- It is important to be clear about what we mean when we talk of God's Kingdom. Under the New Covenant God's Kingdom is a particular geographical place or nation. Instead God's Kingdom *"is God himself ruling his people, and bestowing upon them all the privileges and responsibilities which his rule implies. To this new international God-ruled community, which had replaced the Old Testament national theocracy, Gentiles and Jews belonged on equal terms"* (Stott.)

- **We are now Members of God's Family (v19b)**

- It's incredible to think that we are now citizens in God's Kingdom but as v19 goes on we realise that it's even better than that. In Christ Jew and Gentile are now God's family. Through Christ's death we've been adopted into God's family. By the Holy Spirit we call God Father. We're brothers and sisters of Christ with whom he has shared his inheritance of the new creation.
- This means that the people in our local church are our family and Jesus is clear that belonging to our spiritual family trumps our earthly family. "We no longer derive our family identity, security and guidance primarily from our earthly families." (Coekin.) Jesus challenges us to put our relationship with him and his people above our earthly families (Luke 14:25.)
- As church is family they should be gatherings where we love and care for one another regardless of our background or earthly families. Many of us will have difficult experiences of family. Maybe we come from broken families where there is lots of fighting. Maybe we long for a family of our own and yet we are alone. Maybe our families have grown up and moved away and we're now alone. Whoever we are and whatever our earthly families have been like church is to be a real and genuine family where we love and care for one another. Church is to be a place where get a foretaste of the perfect unity and love that we'll experience with Christ and his people in the new creation. Church isn't just meant to carry the label of "family" it is meant to be family!

- **We are now God's Temple (v20-22)**

- The imagery shifts from Kingdom and Family to Temple. It is not only that we now have a home in God's kingdom... we're actually a home for God!
- As with all buildings the foundations are key and so that is where Paul starts. We will explore what is meant by Prophets and Prophecy below in the Tricky Bit but for now we need to be clear on the big point. The teaching of the Apostles and Prophets is the gospel of Christ-crucified therefore "Every church must be founded on Christ's gospel in scripture or it's not a true church and not part of the heavenly church. There can be

no new foundation. The foundation is finished.” (Coekin.) In Matthew 16 Jesus says that he will build his church on the rock of Peter’s (an Apostle) testimony that Jesus is the Christ the Son of God.

- As Richard Coekin says this means that the foundation of the church is finished. So the church today is to be built on the same foundation that the church has always been built upon. Just because everything around us is changing doesn’t mean that we are free to change the foundations of the church. We are not at liberty to build the church on different foundations that would be more culturally acceptable in our society. It’s God’s building so he gets to say what the foundations are.
- Christ is the cornerstone of the church in the sense that like the cornerstone he holds everything together. As Stott says *“As a building depends for both its cohesion and its development on being tied securely to its cornerstone, so Christ the cornerstone is indispensable to the church’s unity and growth. Unless it is constantly and securely related to Christ, the church’s unity will disintegrate and its growth either stop or run wild.”*
- Indeed from Ephesians 2 we have to say that if a church moves away from the foundation of the gospel then it ceases to be a church. It might call itself a church but it is no longer what God calls a church!
- The church is a Holy Temple for God. He is “not tied to holy buildings but holy people” (Stott.) God dwells in his people by his Spirit and all this is done in Christ/ the Lord. Again we see the Trinity coming through clearly as Paul explains the mystery of the unity of the church.
- God dwells in his people both individually and corporately. What is more because God is Holy he is slowly transforming and “refurbishing his home in our hearts and churches, to suit his holy character, by his Spirit through his word” (Coekin.) There is then a process going on as we are being made Holy and “Only after the creation of the new heaven and the new earth will the voice from the throne declare with emphatic finality: ‘Behold, the dwelling of God is with men.’” (Stott.)
- In summary of these verses let me quote Richard Coekin at length;

“Every local church - however unimpressive the people, however painful the music, however tatty the building - is a spiritually beautiful expression of the glorious church of God in heaven. In fact, each is intended to prepare God’s people for that vast and spectacular multicultural festival that is the heavenly church. Each one demonstrates in the heavenly realms the awesome power and victory of God over evil powers to accomplish his eternal plan to bring everything together under Christ through his reconciling death. So next time you attend your church, however ordinary the people may seem, however unimpressive the building may look, remember the three glorious spiritual dimensions of your church: you’re welcomed into the precious family of God, so love those people deeply; you’re being built upon the foundation of Scripture, so listen to the teaching carefully; and you’re being constructed as a dwelling of the Spirit of God, so be holy in the way you behave. Your local church is a gathering of a new humanity, the temple of the living God, the only “local building” that will last for ever, and a wonder in the heavenly realms. Enjoy it!”

Tricky Bit

• **Who are the Prophets in v20?**

- The issue of prophets and prophecy in the New Testament and the church today is a topic of much debate and one that I don't want to get into here. I also don't think it would be a helpful debate in your groups. What I want us to do is to understand who Paul is referring to in v20 when he speaks of Prophets. Remember that we are studying Ephesians 2:19-22 rather than having a discussion on prophecy.
- Broadly speaking there are 3 possible explanations for what Paul means by Prophets in this verse;
 1. Old Testament Prophets
 2. Foundational New Testament Prophets who are no longer present in the church
 3. Ongoing Prophets who are still present in the church today.
- On the whole I think that #2 is the best understanding for this verse and I will try to explain why I think that...
- If Paul were referring to Old Testament Prophets then the order in which he refers to the Apostles and Prophets seems strange. If he were referring to the Old Testament Prophets then you would expect them to come first and yet he puts the Apostles first. This is also true in 3:5 and 4:11 where Apostles and Prophets are also mentioned.
- Another reason why I do not think he is referring to Old Testament Prophets comes from 3:5 where Paul says that "the mystery of Christ, *which was not made known to people in other generations* has now been revealed by the Spirit to God's holy apostles and prophets." In this verse Paul seems to clearly equate the Prophets with the Apostles as present in the early church in Paul's day in contrast to people in other generations (i.e. Old Testament prophets.)
- Having established that Paul is not speaking about Old Testament prophets here in Ephesians 2:20, we begin to see that Paul is referring to a group of Prophets who along with the Apostles "bore witness to Christ "and whose teaching was derived from revelation (3:5) and was foundational" (Stott).
- The debate comes when we ask whether these prophets are still present and active in the church today?
- For what it is worth I believe that these foundational prophets are not present in the church today but that is not to say that prophecy does not go on in the church today.
- Let me explain. I think that in 2:20 Paul is referring to unique foundational Prophets who along with the Apostles were active in the early church because of the other references to Apostles and Prophets in Ephesians. In both 3:5 and 4:11 there is a sense in which the work of the Apostles and Prophets was to lay down the gospel and Christian teaching as we now have it in the New Testament. Once this foundation was laid these offices were no longer required and thus we do not have Apostles and Prophets today. Instead we have evangelists, pastors and teachers (4:11) who continually preach and teach the apostolic gospel, building up the church through every generation by teaching what was revealed by the Spirit to God's Holy Apostles and Prophets (3:5) and thus the church is built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets (2:20.)
- That is not to say that prophecy cannot occur today, we just need to be clear on what we mean by prophecy. Scripture is complete and sufficient so there cannot be prophecy today that is put on a par with apostolic scripture. As I understand prophecy today it is where a Christian has God-given insight and understanding of scripture that points people to Jesus from the Bible. In Acts 2 Peter quotes Joel 2 where it says that the Holy Spirit will be poured out on all God's people and that they will prophecy. Peter says that this is being fulfilled there on Pentecost and he then goes on to

preach a sermon that points people to Christ from scripture. In that sense Peter was prophesying.

- As I say, there is much debate amongst Bible believing Christians over the exact nature of prophecy. What we can be clear on is that in 2:20 Paul is not referring to the Old Testament Prophets. We can also be clear that the foundational teaching of the Apostles and Prophets was the gospel of Christ-crucified (3:5.) As a group leader I would be very keen to avoid getting into a big debate about prophecy today. Whilst that would be an appropriate discussion if we were studying 1 Corinthians 14 it is not appropriate here. Keep the focus on the foundational role of the Apostles and Prophets and keep the studying moving.

Big Idea

To be part of a church is amazing because in Christ we've been welcomed into God's Kingdom, adopted into his family and we're being built into his temple! Wow!

Suggested Areas of Application

- **Living out our Citizenship**
 - As Christians we are now citizens of God's Kingdom and this trumps all other citizenships and identities. Being a citizen of God's Kingdom trumps being a citizen of the United Kingdom. Yet how many of us spend more time focused on our earthly citizenship rather than our heavenly citizenship. So much of our time and energy and money goes into where we live now as if this is our real home when it is not. In what ways do you do this? What would it look like to orientate our lives around our heavenly citizenship and our eternal home? How would our lifestyles change?
- **Welcoming others in just as we were welcomed in**
 - We were foreigners and strangers and yet we've been welcomed into God's kingdom and his church. As a result we should be a church that is always quick to welcome those who are not like us. That isn't to say that we should welcome unrepentant sinful behaviour. Instead it is about making sure that we are not just making disciples of people who are just like us. Jesus has commissioned us to go and make disciples of all nations, not just the people socially and geographically closest to us.
- **Being Family together**
 - We love to talk about church as family yet so often it is a poor imitation of what family is supposed to be. Very often people who are single or widowed or the only Christians in their families can feel isolated and ignored in the church family. What would it look like to be a loving, serving, welcoming church family to those who are single, or far from home, or lonely, or from broken homes or those who have experienced abuse in their earthly families? The larger we get the harder it will be for BEC to be family and yet we must be striving to be a community united in sacrificial love, service, support and affection. Family is never just about attending events or being on a rota. It's about doing life together through every season whether it's easy or hard.

- **Becoming Holy together**

- As individual Christians and corporately as the church we are God's temple where the Holy Spirit dwells. Whenever someone moves into a new house they redecorate it to suit them and God is no different. He is Holy and so he is transforming his people to become a suitable Holy dwelling place for him. This should raise the question of whether we are progressing in holiness as individuals but it also raises the question of whether we are progressing in holiness corporately as God's people? Are our relationships as a church family increasingly marked by holiness? Are we increasingly a loving, gentle, bearing and pure church? Remember the tense of v22 - "we are being built" it's an ongoing process that won't finish until we're gathered around the throne. As a result we're always to be pursuing holiness together as God's people. There is always more redecorating to be done!

Suggested Bible Study

Starter Question

1. Why do so many people (both Christians and non-Christians) have such a negative and pessimistic view of church?

By the end of chapter 2 Paul wants us to see how amazing and wonderful it is to be part of God's church! It's an incredible privilege and blessing and yet so often we view church as a boring chore. We often ask, "Do you have to go to church to be a Christian?" Such a question shows that we haven't really understood how wonderful it is to be part of the church and how terrible it is to not be part of the church. By exploring some of the reasons why we can be so negative about church it should set up a contrast with the blessings of belonging to the church that Paul is about to spell out to us.

Digging into v19

2. According to v19, what changes take place when you become a Christian?

Paul describes the change in 2 ways. We were foreigners but now we are citizens of God's kingdom and we were strangers but now we're part of his household/family. When we remember where we were (v11-12) this really is amazing!

Applying v19

3. We have been made citizens of God's Kingdom. How should this shape our personal lifestyles and the life of our church?

Our eternal citizenship in God's kingdom should trump our temporary citizenship in this world and yet so often we live as if our present homes and circumstances are eternal. How different our lives and priorities would be if we were shaped more by our eternal citizenship and were less concerned about our temporary citizenship.

4. As a church we are now a family. What will it look like for BEC to be a family rather than just a religious organisation?

A religious organisation is about meetings and events we attend, rotas we belong to and duties we perform. In contrast a family is about relationship, it's about loving one another and caring and supporting one another even when it's costly. You could use this time to think about how we can love and serve the different types of people who make up our church; young and old, married unmarried, different social and educational backgrounds etc etc.

Digging into v20-22

5. What is meant to be the foundation of the church and holding it all together?

The gospel and the scriptures as given to us by God through the apostles and prophets are to be the foundation. If we're trying to be the church on anything other than God's word then we're not a church any more!

Applying v20-22

6. BEC has always prided itself on being a Bible believing church. In what ways might we be in danger of changing the foundation?

Generally speaking there are two dangers for churches like ours when it comes to foundations. We can either seek to replace scripture with our intellect and reason or we can seek to replace scripture with church tradition. In our western educated setting the first of these is probably the biggest danger and it can be very subtle. Scripture rather than what we think or feel must always have the final say. Just because our brains, feelings or society tell us something contrary to scripture we must still put scripture first and keep it as

our ultimate authority. This means submitting our thinking, feeling and views of our culture to scripture.

7. According to v22 we're not a finished work yet. What will it look like for us to grow in holiness together?

In some ways the whole of chapters 4-5 unpack this. Look how ch4 begins, "I urge you to live a life worthy of the calling you have received." You could go through 4:1-3 or 4:25-32 which speak particularly about our relationships as a church and draw out what this would look like in your group and in our church.