

A satisfying moment in reading comes when you think you see what the author wanted you to see. The passage in Ephesians 1:11-14, which we read today, gets us ready to see what the Apostle Paul wanted us, his readers, to see. Before we read it, let's review its context in verses 1-10.

### The Big Picture

God made the decision to create a community on earth He could call His people. He made that decision before the creation of the world, and love prompted Him to make it. Jesus Christ carried out His decision by emancipating followers of Christ from guilt and lies and estrangement from God and constituting them as His chosen people, the Church. In doing so God began to unveil **the mystery of his will**, which is **to bring all things in heaven and on earth together under one head, even Christ**. Those are some of our spiritual blessings in Christ, and they make the Church more than a match for the spiritual forces of evil that make war against the Church and against all human flourishing. Now we are ready for Ephesians 1:11-14.

### We and You

Verses 11-12 sound like a repeat of verses 4-5. Verse four said that **God chose us**. Verse five said: **In love he predestined us**. Now listen to verses 11-12. **In him we were also chosen, having been predestined according to the plan of him who works out everything in conformity with the purpose of his will, in order that we who were the first to hope in Christ, might be for the praise of his glory**. It sounds like a repeat, but a phrase in the middle of verse 12 offers the first clue to what Paul wanted his readers to see. He wrote this: **we who were the first to hope in Christ**. Who was he talking about, when he said **we**?

In verse 13 he wrote this: **And you also were included in Christ when you heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation**. Who was he talking about when he said **you**? It would be a good guess to say he meant the Ephesian Christians. That's true, but Paul had in mind something more specific.

To understand what Paul was thinking we need to look forward for a moment to Ephesians 2. The chapter begins by saying: **As for you**. Verse 3 begins: **All of us**. Throughout chapters 1-3 these two pronouns **we** and **you** alternate back and forth. Then, like a bolt from the blue Ephesians 2:11 clarifies what Paul had in mind: **Therefore, remember that formerly you who are Gentiles by birth**. Every time we read the pronoun **you** in Ephesians, it means Gentile Christians.

Now we can get inside Paul's head. Let's go back to Ephesians 1:12. In the Jewish world Paul grew up in there were only two kinds of people, Jews and Gentiles. So, when he wrote in verse 12: **we who were the first to hope in Christ**, he meant **we Jews were the first to hope in Christ**. All the first Christians were Jews. Most of them said that Gentiles had to become Jewish proselytes in order to become Christians.

Then the Mother Church in Jerusalem under Peter, James, and John made a momentous decision. The Church decided that if Gentiles believed in their hearts that God raised Jesus from the dead and said publicly, "Jesus is Lord," and were baptized into His name, they could be full members of the Church and not become Jewish proselytes. The controversy, which followed

that decision, was divisive and bitter.

Paul had that staggering decision in mind in Ephesians 1:13. **And you (Gentiles) also were included in Christ when you heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation.** Two groups of people that didn't like each other were being brought together under the same roof – or, better, under the same Lord. It was unheard of. It created angst and anger among Jews in Paul's day, but Paul saw something different. He believed that those unprecedented congregations of Jews and Gentiles worshipping Jesus together revealed a new calling for the people of God and heralded a new day for the human family. That's what he wanted all who read Ephesians to see. He expressed his vision memorably in chapters 2-3, and we will give it our full attention when we read those chapters. Now, I want to give you a working model of what Paul's vision was up against.

### **A Working Model**

I came of age in the 1960s. The Civil Rights Movement came of age at about the same time. The Old South where I grew up did not welcome it. Churches for the most part did not like it. I have a memory of that time that still evokes anxiety and sadness in me. There were men in our church who made it very clear that they would stand at the front door and make sure that no black people came in there, causing trouble.

In the 1990s Carole and I were visiting my mom, who still worshiped in that church. It was full. The new pastor was getting along famously. The singing was great. We stood to greet each other. I turned around and was stunned and delighted to greet a black family that was sitting behind us. I thought to myself, "Progress has come to Grimy Gulch." I felt a smidgen of what the apostle felt when he saw Jew and Gentile worshipping Jesus together in the little congregations of the Roman Empire.

Carole and I went back to that church five years ago. It is now an all black congregation. It is thriving, but it is as all black now as it was once all white. The vision of black and white together in Christ had faded into an uneasy, sullen truce.

This August will mark the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Dr. King's "I Have a Dream" speech on the Washington Mall. His dream has often faded into an uneasy, sullen truce between blacks and whites. But the dream is still out there for all who catch his vision.

Ephesians is the Apostle Paul's "I Have a Dream" speech. It is his dream of the Church the new humanity, reunited with God and with each other – the harbinger of the coming unity of all things in heaven and on earth under Christ. His dream has often faded. It faded in his lifetime. But the dream is still out there for all believers in Christ who catch his vision, and we are going to revisit his dream in the weeks to come.

### **Communion**

Between the decision of God to create the Church in Christ before the creation of the world and the fulfillment of God's will **to bring all things in heaven and on earth together under Christ** the pathway is anything but level. Hill and mountain rise up to block the path. Rugged places deter all but the steadfast in heart. The glory of the Lord lies hidden in our lingering suspicions and our lasting fears. But the apostle's dream is not going away, because it is more than an apostle's dream. It is a resolution in the will of God the Father almighty, maker

of heaven and earth. Communion stands at the center of Christian worship as a permanent sign of the covenant between this God and His chosen people, and of the coming unity of all things under Christ. **Because there is one loaf, we, who are many, are one body**, all across the globe. (1 Corinthians 10:17)