

The first Christians were Jews – no exceptions. That fact alone is enough to blow the lid off your grandmother’s pressure cooker; but fact it is. And most Jewish followers of Jesus thought it was nice that Gentiles, those unprincipled, hedonistic goys, were taking an interest in their Jewish Jesus. But if they really wanted to get in on the action, they needed to get with the program. That meant Sabbath observance, renunciation of idols, keeping a kosher table, and most definitively and most painfully, male circumcision – no exceptions.

Gentile believers balked. They dug their heels in. They drew red lines in the sand. They threatened physical harm if any Jewish doctor with a knife got near them. They said, “No! Nein! Nyet! Non!” No surprise there.

What came as a surprise were voices within the Church, Jewish voices in a Jewish Church that said, “We should rethink our position.” That was like rethinking motherhood and apple pie. Arguments ensued – unending, longer and longer, and louder and louder arguments. Jews who emphatically did not believe in Jesus got in on the fray. The honor of Judaism was at stake. There were late night meetings and formal hearings; and one day – how do these things happen? – things turned violent. The argument became an excuse to persecute Jewish Christians, even if they were strict Jews, and a young deacon named Stephen became the first Christian martyr, and followers of Jesus became refugees, some of them fleeing to the city of Antioch in neighboring Syria.

The strategy of repression was misguided, as it always is. It backfired, as it always does. The refugees to neighboring Syria told their story to inquiring Syrian citizens. They told the whole story, including crucifixion and resurrection, and to their astonishment many Gentiles wanted to hear more about this Y’shua ben Youssef, and many of them became believers in Jesus, and they formed a church, if that’s what you could call it. It was a church in which Jewish traditions were not enforced.

That in a nutshell is how a fringe group in the Jerusalem Church, who raised disturbing questions about Jewish traditions and paid dearly for it, unintentionally gave birth to a church in Gentile country that not only raised the same disturbing questions but also answered them by establishing a church where Gentiles were not required to follow Jewish traditions.

Paul

Enter Paul stage right, down center. Paul came to that unorthodox Syrian group to teach the faith. With the blessing of that church he set out on his missionary journeys, and everywhere he went he started churches like the one in Antioch, not like the one in Jerusalem. They baptized people, who were not circumcised, who didn’t observe the Sabbath, who didn’t keep a kosher table; and some of those “unclean” Gentile believers rose to positions of leadership in the new churches of the Empire. It was revolutionary. It ruffled feathers. It raised blood pressures. It inflamed passions. It evoked violence of a kind we know only too well in the suburbs of Aleppo and in Cairo’s Tahrir Square.

25 years later, Paul had time to reflect on the dramatic sequence of events I just sketched. Those events transformed the Church from a small, exclusive, Jewish sect into a faith for the human race. Paul witnessed those events and to a large extent caused them. His experience prepared him to write Ephesians, his masterful summary of the hinge of history on which the door of salvation swung open to receive people from every **tribe and language and**

people and nation (Revelation 5:9) on the face of the earth.

That brings us to Ephesians 3:4-6: **In reading this, then, you will be able to understand my insight into the mystery of Christ, which was not made known to men in other generations as it has now been revealed by the Spirit to God's holy apostles and prophets. This mystery is that through the gospel the Gentiles are heirs together with Israel, members together of one body, and sharers together in the promise in Christ Jesus.** The meaning of this passage blossoms like flowers in a greenhouse at Longwood Gardens, when you keep in mind the dramatic sequence of events I just sketched. Look at the three statements of status that once applied only to Israel but now apply to the Church as well.

Heirs together with Israel – he did not say “with Christian Jews” but **with Israel**, with Jews taken as a whole. Paul saw the Church, Jew and Gentile, as having something immeasurably good in common with Israel – with Jewish people whether they were followers of Jesus or not. I will elaborate on this dynamic idea in a moment.

Members together of one body – there was not to be a Jewish Church and a Gentile Church. There was to be one Church, one body of Christ. (1 Corinthians 12:13) There is not to be a Black Church and a White Church and a Chinese Church, etc. Those labels may be convenient shorthand for the ethnic make up of congregations, but if we aren't careful, and we have not been careful, convenience may kill the optic nerve of our spiritual sight, so that we can no longer see that red and yellow, black and white, we Christians are all **members together of one body**. There is only one, holy, catholic, and apostolic Church.

Sharers together in the promise – God promised Abraham that he and his descendants would be **heir of the world**. (Romans 4:13) That now applies to the Church as well. God promised to give to His chosen people the Holy Spirit. (Ephesians 1:13; Galatians 3:14) That now applies to the Church as well. Promises that only God can keep marked Israel as God's chosen people. (Romans 9:9) That now applies to the Church as well.

Israel

What comes next could be left out, and you might not know the difference. I have included it, because it is true, and I believe it is as revolutionary as was the sequence of events in Paul's day we just talked about. Its revolutionary power is muffled in our time. So, it may seem more like a polite conversation than a call to revolution, but I think you should hear it, and we find it in verse 6 again.

This mystery is that through the gospel the Gentiles are heirs together with Israel. Those last two words, **with Israel**, explode like a cherry bomb in an echo chamber. He did not say and he did not mean that Gentiles are heirs only with Christian Jews. They are heirs **with Israel**, with Jews taken as a whole, Christian and non-Christian alike. Paul taught that the Church shared the spiritual heritage of Israel.

For those of you who like to think in terms of election and predestination, think about it this way. Moses said to Israel: **You are a people holy to the Lord your God. The Lord your God has chosen you out of all the peoples on the face of the earth to be his people, his treasured possession.** (Deuteronomy 7:6)

The Church does not have a separate election. Jesus included the Church within Israel's election. I am not a Jew, but I am Israel. I have been brought into relationship with the God of

Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. You can say the same. Maybe we should tell our Jewish friends about that. They may not be entirely happy to hear it, but neither their reluctance to hear nor ours to tell negates the inclusion of the Church within the election of Israel. But why should anyone care?

Pope John Paul II embodied the reawakening of the Church to its indissoluble relationship with Jews. On April 13, 1986, for the first time in the history of the Roman Catholic Church, the Pope stood in the central Synagogue of Rome and said this: “The Jewish religion is not ‘extrinsic’ to us, but in a certain way is ‘intrinsic’ to our own religion . . . With Judaism, therefore, we have a relationship which we do not have with any other religion. You are our dearly beloved brothers, and, in a certain way, it could be said that you are our elder brothers.”

(<http://www.nytimes.com/1986/04/14/international/europe/14POPE.html>, accessed 7/3/13)

No one quoted Ephesians 3:6 that day, but in his statement the vision of the apostle leaped off the pages of the Bible like Superman off a tall building. The divine yeast was working its way through the human dough, and it has happened in our lifetime, right under our noses. What the Nazis meant for evil, God meant for good. In some way that we don’t fully grasp Christians and Jews are bound together till the end of time. We should care.

The Wisdom of God

We should care for another reason. I just said that God is doing something no one expected right under our noses, just as He did in Paul’s day. God is doing it for the same purpose now as He did then. Look at verse 10: **His intent (God’s intent) was that now, though the church, the manifold wisdom of God should be made known.**

Maybe you think I am silly or irresponsible to say what I am about to say. But I will say it until the Chicago Cubs win the World Series. The Church is the showcase for the manifold wisdom of God in this world. The dramatic sequence of events that we have talked about today released the spiritual riches of Israel and made them available to every person on the planet. Today, 2 people out of every 7 on the planet participate in those spiritual riches. Those numbers make Google and Facebook look like small children selling lemonade on the corner compared to the wisdom of God showcased in the Church of God all across the wide world.

But I have to stop here and be accountable. You are an attentive congregation, and you will have noticed that I did not read all of verse 10. **His intent (God’s intent) was that now, though the church, the manifold wisdom of God should be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly realms.**

We’ve talked about this before, and we’ll talk about it again, when we reach Ephesians 6:11-12. **The heavenly realms** are not heaven. They are where the conflict between good and evil take place. They are where the spiritual forces of evil fragment, betray, and kill human life; but when the Church makes known the wisdom of God, which reunites, befriends, and gives life to the human family in Christ, they know they have met their match, and their days are numbered.

Take-away

As we move through the remaining weeks of summer, make it your determined effort to do the following:

1. Reread or listen again to Ephesians 1-3 several times, recalling some of what you have heard, as we have made our way through these chapters.
2. Once again, take the prayer of Ephesians 1:15-20, put it in your own words or use it like it is, and then pray it several times this week. Pray for yourself, the people in the world you love the best, for BVBC, and for the whole beautiful, maddening, Church that is spread throughout the whole wide world.