

THE THIRD RACE

by Ray C. Stedman

In Chapter 2 of Ephesians, we have been working through the great revelation of the Apostle Paul concerning the nature of the church. The title of this study, *The Third Race*, is not a reference to an event at Bay Meadows race track, but is an actual description of early Christians by a pagan contemporary in the 1st century. He called them "the third race."

Every nationality tends to divide the world into two parts -- "them, and us."

- The Jews always have looked upon the world of their day as made up of Jews and Gentiles. Anyone not a Jew is a Gentile in the eyes of the Jewish people.
- The Greeks did the same. There were the Greeks, the "civilized" people, and all the rest were "barbarians." They based that word on the verb *barbar* which means "to stammer." Anyone who didn't speak Greek, the civilized language, sounded to the Greeks like a stuttering child.
- When the Romans took over the Greek civilization, they adopted the same terminology. Everyone within the Roman empire was Roman; all others were "barbarians."
- The Chinese did the same thing. "China" is derived from their word for "middle," for they saw themselves as the center of the earth, the Middle Kingdom. Everyone else lived out on the periphery of the earth.

The Apostle Paul adopts this terminology in writing to the Ephesian Christians. He points out to them that they began either as Jews or Gentiles -- one or the other, and that this division reflected their relationship to God. The Jews were near to God. They were not there yet, but they were close. They had the Scriptures, they had the promises, they had knowledge of God, and contact with him; therefore, they were close, near at hand. The Gentiles were far off. They were pagans, living in superstitious fear. They were immoral. And their outlook on life and the future was that of despair and hopelessness. So they were far off. Now, both were separated from God. The Jews needed to take the final step which would actually bring them to God through Jesus Christ. The Gentiles needed to take that step as well. And, in our last study, we saw how, in coming to Christ, both Jew and Gentile are made one. As Paul says, "The middle wall of hostility is removed," and they are made one in Christ.

I saw a beautiful illustration of this while in Tucson recently, in a confrontation between the church people and the hippies. The people of the church were, for the most part, godly, gracious, Christian people, but fearful of those with a different lifestyle than they. The hippies were a fine group of young Christians who came out of the youth revolt of our day. But the differences of behavior, of dress, of hair styling, created a hostility which was separating the two groups. And I saw how the Lord worked to remove all these partitions and take away the hostility.

As Paul told us, the Lord does this by removing self-righteousness. Nothing creates hostility as readily as self-righteousness, the presumption that we are all right, and they are all wrong. This arouses distress, creates resentment, polarizes and divides people. A vivid example of this is the way our current Vice President has been speaking. He has made a great many accusations, some of them perhaps very true. But, because there has been no self judgment, it always sounds as though he considers that "they" are all wrong, while "we" are all right, and there has been unnecessary polarization and division. But this sort of thing is removed, the apostle says, when our Lord comes in and judges both sides, and they stand on common ground, guilty of the same sin, needing the same Savior, exercising the same faith. So they are united and made one. A new unity is created, something different than ever existed before. And this is done before God, so that it is realistic, lasting, permanent.

In the passage we come to now, the apostle goes on to give us the advantages, the privileges, which are a result of this new unity in Jesus Christ between Jew and Gentile. Here we learn once more something of the tremendous resources which are ours as Christians. I don't know how to say this forcefully enough, for I do not know anything more necessary than that we really devote ourselves to grasping these great facts. For if we understand who we are in Christ, then we will have some understanding of what to do in our circumstances, in our problems. I see many people who are wrestling with terrible anxieties, fears, and hostilities, which actually prevent them from acting as God intended human beings to act, all because they have not discovered the full resources which are available in Jesus Christ. This is why the apostle labored so to set these out before us by direct statement or, as in this case, with certain figures or pictures, so that we might understand more fully. So I would urge you to give careful heed to what he says here, beginning with Verse 19:

So then you are no longer strangers and sojourners, but you are fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God, built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus himself being the cornerstone, in whom the whole structure is joined together and grows into a holy temple in the Lord; in whom you also are built into it for a dwelling place of God in the Spirit. {Eph 2:19-22 RSV}

Notice that there are three beautiful figures employed in this passage, which follow one upon the other -- each an advance upon the previous one. These are designed to teach us great truths about what it means to be a Christian. There is the figure of a kingdom ("fellow citizens with the saints"), a family ("members of the household of God"), and a building ("a holy temple ... for a dwelling place of God in the Spirit"). These are designed to instruct us so that Paul's prayer for us in the first chapter will be answered. His prayer was, "...having the eyes of your hearts enlightened, that you may know what is the hope to which he has called you, what are the riches [the enriching possibilities] of his glorious inheritance in the saints, and what is the immeasurable greatness of his power in us who believe," {Eph 1:18-19a RSV}.

Please discard the notion many have that this is only magnificent language. It is not merely language; it is reality. Take these words literally and plainly and personally, because this is what will enable us to understand what to do when we get into difficulty, how to handle problems, and how to work out relationships which are strained or broken. It is with these great resources that we can solve these problems.

Now let us take a closer look at the passage. Notice that the apostle begins with a negative. "You Ephesians " he says, "are no longer strangers and sojourners." That is, "Once you were strangers and [literally] foreigners but now no longer."

What is a stranger? We all have been strangers at one time or another. We have come into a city or state which is different from our own. We haven't known where to go or what to do, because we were ignorant of the resource, of the community. A stranger is characterized by not knowing much about the place where he is. A few weeks ago Jim Heaton and I were walking down a street in Spokane, Washington. A man stopped us, and asked, "Could you tell me where the J.C. Penney store is located?" I said, "I'm sorry, I'm a stranger here myself." I meant, "I'm ignorant of the advantages of this community, of all the cultural possibilities -- ignorant of where the finest department stores are located." Strangers are ignorant. Once we were strangers, says the apostle. We did not know what God could do for us. We had no idea of the resources of peace and joy and forgiveness. We knew nothing of his capacity for handling our fears and our phobias and our hostilities. We did not know what to do with them; we were utter strangers in knowing how to handle them. But no more, he says. Now that we have come to Christ we are no more strangers.

And we are no longer foreigners, either. A foreigner is different than a stranger. A foreigner may be very familiar with the country in which he lives. He may have lived there for years and may be fully acquainted with the possibilities of it. But he is limited. He is all alien; he has no ultimate rights. He is living on a passport. He does not have a birth certificate which makes him a citizen of that land.

This is very descriptive of many people in churches. They attend church regularly, and sometimes study the Bible, and are familiar with the hymns. Perhaps you have been raised in a Christian family, and the language of Christianity is very familiar to you, but you have never become a Christian. You are a foreigner, you are

living on a passport. And, in a time of crisis, aliens are deported, sent back; they are not permitted to enter into the full rights of citizens of the land.

But Paul says that you who have come to Christ are no more strangers and foreigners.

Well then, what are you? Three things, three figures:

1. First, you are "fellow citizens with the saints." That is a great phrase. It captures the idea of a new kingdom -- you have entered a new kingdom. You have changed your citizenship; you are now under another authority.

Most of us who attend PBC are American citizens. We take so for granted the rights of American citizenship that we have almost forgotten the responsibilities of it, and the fact that we are under authority. Because we are Americans, the government has certain powers over us. It regulates certain areas of our life, whether we like it or not. We are under certain controls, and if we do certain things the government can step in and actually take our freedom from us. We are under authority -- that is the first mark of citizenship.

The Bible recognizes two kingdoms in this world. In addition, of course, to the nations of earth, with their temporal authority, there are two spiritual kingdoms. And every one of us belongs to one or the other. It is, as Paul says, either the power of Satan or the power of God. One or the other has ultimate dominion over our lives. When you become a Christian, you move out of the kingdom of Satan into the kingdom of God. What a change this is! There is a basic change of government, of the ultimate rule in a person's life. Jesus often spoke of the kingdom he came to bring among men. He said, "I am a king, but my kingdom is not of this world" {cf, John 18:36-37}, by which he meant that it is not like any of the nations of earth. His kingship is over the hearts of men. But it is a kingdom; it has authority over men. When we come into his kingdom, we come under a new authority, a new king, a new head. We are no longer under the bondage and power of the other. What a transformation this is!

Being in another kingdom, even while we are right here on earth, means that we have certain responsibilities and certain privileges which are given to us in Christ. For instance, every citizen knows that he must learn the history of his nation in order to understand it. We Americans had to go to school and take *American History*, and thus learn what has happened in the past. And, in a sense, that is what we have been doing on these Sunday mornings at PBC. We are learning from the Apostle Paul the history of this great kingdom of God -- what it is, and what has happened, and why we have certain privileges because of what has been recorded.

Then, we have certain concerns we must manifest, and certain choices to make. We have recently voted in a national election. Even if you voted for the loser, you at least exercised the right of choice. As a citizen, you had this right. In the kingdom of God it is exactly the same. Certain choices are now possible for you, and you must make them. You have certain concerns you must become involved with.

But the thing which makes us rejoice in our citizenship is that we have certain privileges. When I travel abroad I am always glad that I am an American citizen. I know there is much in the history of our country which is to be regretted. But every nation has had similar problems. And no nation that I know of has done more to benefit the other peoples of earth. So I rejoice in the great privileges which are mine as an American citizen. I am granted the use of certain resources which other nationalities cannot enjoy. Protection is extended to me as an American citizen which others do not have.

Right now we are all concerned about the fate of the POW's in Vietnam. There are not many of them -- less than five hundred. Yet this great nation of approximately two hundred million people is intensely concerned about their fate. And all the resources of this country are dedicated to doing something for these men. Our President has declared that he will not, under any circumstances, accept a peace which does not involve the freeing of these men. Why? Why should this great nation be concerned about a handful of men? Because they are citizens. They belong to this country. They have

the rights and the privileges of citizens. And how grateful we would be, if we were in that group, that this nation has not forgotten us, that it is struggling to do all it can to set us free and to bring us home again. That is the privilege of being an American.

You have something similar in the kingdom of God. You have the protection of a King, and you have the right to expect him to protect you. There is power available -- resurrection power, the kind that works beyond human thinking and planning. And God invites you to call upon him for that kind of resource, that kind of deliverance, whenever you need it. There is recourse for the correction of problems. Jesus said, "When people persecute you, rejoice and be glad, because your King has not forgotten you, and there is a great reward laid up for you," {Matt 5:11-12}. He knows what to do. Furthermore, "Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord," {Rom 12:19 RSV}. "Don't try to work it out on your own," he says, "I have not forgotten. I know to straighten it out, and to do so in a way that you will ultimately be glad of and not ashamed. I am not merely going to move in and crack heads together; I'm going to solve the problem in a way that will be permanently peaceful." So we have access to the king, and we can expect his protection and his justice.

And, as Paul points out here also, we share in a tremendous degree of glory. We are fellow citizens with the saints. Who are these saints he is mentioning? As Paul writes, he is thinking in terms of the great saints of the Old Testament, men like Abraham and Moses, Elijah and Elisha, and David, and Isaiah and Jeremiah. We have an inheritance with them; we belong to the same kingdom.

As Americans, many of us are proud that we belong to the nation which produced George Washington, Abraham Lincoln, and other great men. And here is an association like that.

We actually become personal friends with men such as Abraham, Moses, David, and Noah. Jesus himself said, "I tell you, many will come from the east and west and sit at table with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven," {Matt 8:11 RSV}. Think of that! What a tremendous privilege to know these people whom God has honored in the past -- Paul and Peter and James and John, Luther and Augustine and Wesley. We have often sung the hymns of Charles Wesley and his brother John. Bill Newton and I have speculated that there may be a day when we will sit down with "Chuck" and "Jack" Wesley and talk with them about what they've been doing, and what they preached on. This is the intimacy of the kingdom of God, of "fellow citizens with the saints," and is what it means in terms of honor and glory and protection and power -- not just for the future, but now.

Then, the final glory of all -- we have access to the King himself. He walks with us, he tells us his plans, his programs, where he is going in history, what he is doing. Just think of the tremendous possibilities of this! We don't have to dwell on it, but this is something of what the apostle wants us to grasp and reckon upon as a result of the figure he employs here -- the marvelous privileges we have in Christ.

2. Then the second figure: "members of the household of God." This is an advance on the other. We all are citizens of the kingdom, if we are in Christ. We belong to God's kingdom, that spiritual kingdom which rules over all the nations of earth, and ultimately will be the winner in all of history. But more than that, says the apostle, we are members of God's own intimate family. John the Apostle never could get over this. He said, "Behold what manner of love the Father has bestowed upon us, that we should be called the children of God; and so we are," {cf, 1 Jn 3:1}. Children of the living God!

You can see what an advance this is. A child always outranks any ambassador or governor or secretary or minister or senator. A biography of Abraham Lincoln I once read related an incident which occurred during the Civil War when the President was involved with his cabinet in a very crucial, decisive meeting. They were in the Cabinet room, working out their grand strategy, when there came a knock at the door. There stood little Willy, the President's ten-year-old son, wanting to see his father for a moment. Abraham Lincoln laid aside all the duties of state, left all the Cabinet members cooling their heels, while he saw what Willy wanted. Willy outranked all the others. He had access to his father.

This is the great truth that Paul is trying to bring home to our hearts -- the fact that we have access to a Father, a Father who is the King, with tremendous authority and power in the affairs of the world, in life as it is lived right now.

Ron Ritchie and I were sharing recently how a certain member of our congregation has just had a tremendous change of heart, of attitude and outlook. We realized that the reason for it was that people were praying for him. Praying to whom? Praying to a heavenly Father who is a King in authority. It was he who arranged the circumstances and opened this person's eyes, so that the truth began to come home to him and he began to see things rightly. It was he who brought his person back. The provision and protection of a father is always more intimate and personal even than that of a king. A king is concerned about our general welfare, but a father wants to know all about our intimate problems.

Is this not what Jesus teaches? He says again and again, "Do you not know that your heavenly Father knows that you have need of these things? He even knows the number of the hairs of your head," {cf, Luke 12:30, Matt 10:30}. Your Father's concern is all around you, about every aspect of your life. He is not only concerned about getting justice for you. A king does that. But you are the object of his deepest, most intimate, personal concern. As Zechariah tells us, God said of his people Israel, "He who touches you touches the apple of my eye," {cf, Zech 2:8}. Could anything be closer than that?

3. Yes, there is something. Paul goes on, in the third figure, to an even closer relationship: you are "built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus himself being the cornerstone." Perhaps that seems something of an anticlimax. After all, a building is rather cold and impersonal compared with the relationship of a family. But if you look carefully you will see what is in the apostle's mind. He is actually moving closer, higher, to a more intimate relationship, because he is stressing the closeness of the members of the very habitation of God -- to one another and to the Lord.

It is possible for the members of a family to be scattered throughout the earth. Some of you have family members who are thousands of miles away. You still are related, still are members one of another, but you are widely separated and haven't seen one another for years. But in the figure of a building, no separation of stones which make up the walls is possible. Everything is closely joined together, knit together. If the stones were separated, the building would crumble. So the apostle really is bringing us into a much more intimate relationship.

Furthermore, he says that this building is a living, growing habitation of God. It merges right into the figure of a body. The building becomes the body of God, the dwelling place where God himself lives. And what could be more personal, more intimate to you, than your body? We reserve the word "intimate" for that which concerns our body. An intimate relationship is one which touches you physically, touches your body. Thus Paul is reminding us of how close we are to God -- a God of power, a God of might, a God of love -- of how intimate his relationship is to us, and of how he ties us all together, builds us into this tremendous building he is erecting.

Paul mentions that we are built on the foundation of the apostles and the prophets -- the men who first disseminated the Christian faith, beyond our Lord himself. They are the foundation. Their faith and their teaching is what we rest upon. They had to understand that Jesus was Lord, and the Spirit of God taught them this. I have often thought that the people who had the most difficulty of all in believing that Jesus was God were his own disciples. Imagine them as they walk with him and talk with him and see his humanity. They listen to him laughing and breathing, watch him sleeping and perhaps even snoring, see him subject to the normal limitations of human life, even going through the normal elimination processes -- like everyone else. How difficult it must have been for them to grasp the great fact that here was God the Son, become flesh. Yet they came to this knowledge. John says,

And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, full of grace and truth; we have beheld his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father. {John 1:14 RSV}

They examined him intimately, were with him every moment. For three-and-a-half years they lived closely with him. And there came the conviction that here indeed was God, living in human flesh. He

was God, yet manifesting what humanity was to be like. And so on their faith we rest. They taught us the truth about the Lord Jesus. Their faith and teaching is the foundation.

And, the apostle says, Christ himself is the chief cornerstone. When you build a building, you place the cornerstone. And all the measurements of that building are taken from that cornerstone. Everything relates to it. The whole building ties together because of the cornerstone. The apostle depicts Jesus as having that relationship with us. You notice that, all through this letter, he cannot forget him a second. Everything is "in Christ," "in him," "by him," "through him," "through his blood," "by his death." Everything comes to us in Christ. If you do not have Jesus, there is no way you can have intimate fellowship with God. "No man comes to the Father but by me" {cf, John 14:6}, says Jesus. So it is all built on Christ. He is the great cornerstone of our faith. And yet we are all members of it, stones being joined together.

Some years ago I helped Paul Carlson build his house in northern Mexico, among the Tarahumara Indians. He had hired an Indian stonemason to work on the walls. I was very interested to watch him. He had a pile of stones he had dug up and gathered in from the hillside. He would go and look at these stones, and pick one he thought was the right size and shape. Then he would take a chisel and hammer and knock off a piece here and smooth off an edge there, and then place it where he wanted it to go. If it didn't quite fit, he would knock off another piece here and there until it was exactly right. Then he would cement it in place with mortar.

That is exactly the picture Paul has given us here of how God is at work with us. He is knocking off the rough edges, shaping us up, getting us ready. And if he has put you with some people you don't like, it is because they are the chisel he is using to knock off some rough edges. This is no joke; it is exactly what God is doing. He is building a temple, a holy temple -- a beautiful, magnificent building.

I do not know anything that makes sense of history, other than this point of view. To read history apart from this outlook leaves nothing but a meaningless jumble of political campaigns and battles and bloodshed among warring factions. But if you look at history from this point of view you will see that every one of those battles, every one of those campaigns, was part of the process of God -- preparing his people, straightening them out, chiseling a piece here, chipping a piece there, sanding them down, smoothing them out, getting them ready, building them in, fitting them in place in this great temple. And one day, the only thing left of history will be this temple God has built, the church of Jesus Christ. Everything else -- all our great buildings, all our vaunted progress -- will have been lost in the dust of a nuclear storm. The only thing left will be the church of Jesus Christ, the people in whom God dwells. This is what he is doing with us now -- building us into this temple. What a difference it makes if we begin to understand some of the possibilities and the privileges which are ours!

When the temple of Solomon was built, we read in First Kings 6:7,

... it was with stone prepared at the quarry; so that neither hammer nor axe nor any tool of iron was heard in the temple, while it was being built. {1 Ki 6:7b RSV}

It was a quiet, secret process. Stones were shaped down in the quarry, and then brought up to be fitted into place without the sound of a hammer. This is a beautiful picture of what God is doing with the church of Jesus Christ today. Already we are temples of the living God. Individually, our bodies are the temple of God himself. If we understand that, and the relationship into which it brings us with God as King and Father, what a great resource we have to draw upon!

Prayer

Our heavenly Father, our eyes are so often dull and dim. We so often take these figures as though they were mere words on paper. We pray that you will help us to see the living reality behind them, to see what you are doing in our lives, and how you are putting it all together, how you have chosen us and selected us to be stones, part of this living building which is growing together, and how we are to belong to each other and draw closer to one another,

that we might fulfill your great purpose in having a place to live, a dwelling place of God. Our Father, help us to remember all this in times of personal difficulty, to remember how you are a Father, a great King, and that we have privileges and rights and access and resources that many of us have never even claimed. Help us now to be living in the fullness of the provision you have made for us -- not as servants but as sons of the living God. We ask this, and thank you, in Jesus' name, Amen.

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