

Ephesians 2: 14-15

In the second chapter of Ephesians there is a widely *misunderstood* passage: “For He [Christ] Himself is our peace, who has made both one, and has broken down the middle wall of separation, having abolished in His flesh the enmity, that is, the law of commandments contained in ordinances, so as to create in Himself one new man from the two, thus making peace” (Eph. 2: 14-15).

What is this “middle wall of separation”---or “middle wall of *partition between us*,” as it’s rendered in the KJV? Also, what is “the law of commandments contained in ordinances” that was *abolished* by Christ’s crucifixion?

We will now look at the answers to these questions, and the truth may be surprising!

Consider the *context* of the passage above. First, the verses which immediately precede the passage: “Therefore remember that you, once Gentiles in the flesh—who are called Uncircumcision by what is called the Circumcision made in the flesh by hands— that at that time you were without Christ, being aliens from the commonwealth of Israel and strangers from the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world. But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ” (verses 11-13). Now, the verses which *follow* the passage: “and that He might reconcile them both to God in one body through the cross, thereby putting to death the enmity. And He came and preached peace to you who *were* afar off and to those who were near. For through Him we both have access by one Spirit to the Father. Now, therefore, you are no longer strangers and foreigners, but fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God” (verses 16-19).

So, the entire context of this passage is a discussion of how the Jews and Gentiles had been very *separate* from one another, but now---through Christ’s sacrifice---they could become *one*. Both groups could be “spiritual Israelites.” Yes, all true *Christians are* Israelites---i.e., *spiritual Israelites*---Israelites by *grace*, not necessarily Israelites by race. It’s only *through Christ* that a Gentile can become a spiritually *adopted* Israelite---and thus become a seed (child) of Abraham---who was the *father* of Israel, and to whom the promises of God were made. Speaking to *Gentile-born* Christians in Galatia, Paul said, “And if you are Christ’s, then **you are Abraham’s seed**, and heirs according to the promise” (Gal. 3:29).

Now that we have the overall picture, let’s look more closely at the *separation and animosity* that had existed for many hundreds of years between the Israelites and Gentiles.

It was, in fact, according to God’s will that the Israelites---God’s chosen people---keep themselves *somewhat separate* from the rest of the world (Deut. 7:2-6; 12:29-31; Jer. 10:2; Num. 33:51-56; Neh. 13:23-27; Ex. 34:15). However, at times, Jewish religious leaders had wrongly taken this concept to an *extreme*.

“In the days of the apostles social intercourse [interaction] with gentiles... rendered a Jew ceremonially *unclean*, according to the *tradition* of the elders. Even entering a gentile house (for example, John 18:28) or handling articles belonging to gentiles did so. Bread, milk or olive oil coming from gentile farms and marketplaces could not be eaten by an observant Jew.... To sit down and eat with a gentile was unthinkable.”¹

At the Jewish Temple, a literal *wall* separated the Jews from any Gentiles who worshipped there. In fact, attached to this wall were multiple written commands prohibiting the Gentiles from *crossing* this barrier. Excavations during 1871 and 1934 have recovered two such inscriptions which were on the wall.

One of them is as follows: “No foreigner [non-Israelite] may enter within the barricade which surrounds the sanctuary and enclosure. Anyone who is caught doing so will have himself to blame for his ensuing **death**.”²

It was the *breaking down* of that wall, to which Paul made an analogy---when he said that Christ had “*broken down* the middle wall of separation” (Eph. 2:14).

That brings us to the second question: what is “the law of commandments contained in ordinances,” spoken of in verse 15? Whatever it is, verse 15 says that it caused “enmity [hostility],” and that it was *abolished* in Christ’s flesh.

Many people *assume* that this refers to God’s spiritual law, as summarized by the Ten Commandments. However, such is *not* the case! It was *not* the Ten Commandments that were nailed to the cross! Furthermore, in *no way*, would Paul have stated that God’s spiritual *law* had been “abolished” --- since Paul repeatedly *endorsed* God’s law and knew that it **remains** in effect for Christians!

What, then, were these “commandments contained in ordinances,” which caused hostility between Jews and Gentiles?

The word “ordinances” in verse 15, is translated from the Greek word “dogma,” and it refers here to *human* laws and decrees (see Note #1 below). Notice a slight *variation* of this word---“dogmatizo”--- which Paul used in Colossians chapter 2: “Wherefore if ye be dead with Christ from the rudiments of the world, why, as though living in the world, are ye subject to ordinances [dogmatizo], (Touch not; taste not; handle not; Which all are to perish with the using;) after the commandments and doctrines of men?” (verses 20-22, KJV). These ordinances (dogmatizo) of “Touch not, taste not, handle not” refer to **man-made**, ascetic ordinances. In fact, verse 22 above *calls* them “commandments and doctrines **of men**”!

So, just as the “ordinances” spoken of in Col. 2:20-22 are *man-made* ordinances, the “ordinances” spoken of in Ephesians chapter 2 are, likewise, man-made ordinances. Furthermore, these ordinances in Ephesians chapter 2 caused enmity, or hostility, between the Jews and the Gentiles.

This is speaking of, on the one hand, the restrictive *pharisaical* decrees, which burdened and set apart the Jews---and, on the other hand, the restrictive and divisive ordinances of the Gentiles, who were under the influence of pagan philosophers. The Gentiles---with their “great” philosophers---looked down on the Jews, just as the Jews looked down on the Gentiles.

“Both sets of human ordinances [Jewish and Gentile] contributed to feelings of prejudice, animosity, suspicion, and *separation* between the Jews and gentiles who were being called into God’s Church. These ordinances acted as a ‘middle wall of partition.’”³ Some Jews who converted to Christianity found it difficult to forget and *change* this deeply ingrained part of their lives.

Even the Apostle Peter was affected, as evidenced in the following statement by Paul: “Now when Peter had come to Antioch, I *withstood him* to his face, because he was to be blamed; for *before* certain men came from James, he would eat with the Gentiles; but when *they* came, he withdrew and *separated* himself, fearing those who were of the circumcision” (Gal. 2:11-12).

Yes, Paul *rebuked* Peter. Why? Because Peter was not acknowledging by his actions that Christ had *broken down* this “wall of separation.”

In conclusion, we have plainly seen that in Eph. 2:15, where Paul speaks of the “commandments contained in ordinances,” he is **not** referring to *God’s* commandments. Rather, he is referring to *man-made* ordinances---which he also spoke of in Col. 2:20-22.

Notes:

1. Regarding Paul's usage of the Greek word "dogma": His usage of the term in Eph. 2:15 and Col. 2:20 is discussed above. The *only other* scripture where Paul uses the term is in Col. 2:14. Here, it does **not** refer to *human* laws and decrees. Yet, the *reason* that it does not, is because in this particular verse the word "dogma" is used as *part of* a Greek idiom---as discussed in the article "*What Was Nailed to the Cross?*"

References:

1. "If You Had Seen Peter's Vision..." Herman L. Hoeh, *The Good News*, January 1979
2. *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, vol. 11, p.40
3. Letter #88, August 1987, Personal Correspondence Department, Worldwide Church of God