

Ephesians 2: 14-15

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In the second chapter of Ephesians, notice the following, 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, *NKJV*).

What is that “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 those questions, and the truth may be surprising!

Consider the *context* of the passage above. First, notice the verses which immediately *precede* that 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. (Eph. 2: 11-13)

Now, consider the verses which *follow* that 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—that is, “*spiritual Israelites*”—Israelites by *grace*, not necessarily Israelites by race. It is 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). (See the article entitled “The Old and New Covenants,” subheading “New Covenant for GENTILES?”)

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

Animosity Between 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).

“the law of commandments *contained* in ordinances”

Now we come 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! (See the article “*What Was Nailed to the Cross?*”)

Furthermore, Paul would *never* have stated that God’s spiritual *law* had been “abolished.” In fact, Paul repeatedly *endorsed* God’s law, and knew that it **remains** in effect for Christians! (See the article “*Did Paul Do Away With God’s Law?*”)

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 there to **human** laws and decrees (see Note #1 below). Notice a slight *variation* of that 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?**” (Col. 2: 20-22, *KJV*). These ordinances (“dogmatizo”) of “Touch not, taste not, handle not” refer to **man-made**, *ascetic* ordinances. In fact, verse 22 *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, those “ordinances” in Ephesians chapter 2 caused enmity (hostility) *between* the Jews and the Gentiles (Eph. 2: 11-19). Those ordinances were, 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 And, 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.”

Conclusion

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

NOTE:

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

References:

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