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## Human Relations According to "Ephesians"

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ABOUT ten years ago a high school girl from the South took first place in a radio contest with her answer to the question, "How should Hitler be punished for his crimes against humanity?" She won a prize for the answer: "He ought to be made to wear a black face and to live in a community where racial discrimination is practiced."<sup>1</sup> This girl had observed, if not experienced, the horrors of prejudice, of man's most cruel inhumanity to man. It is something of a tragic commentary on human affairs that the worst punishment this student could imagine had to be described in terms of an attitude toward a particular race by members of a different biological strain.

The evil of prejudice has been treated from many angles in the past. It has been done statistically, so to speak, in as recent a document as "Civil Rights in the United States, 1952," assembled and published by the American Jewish Congress and the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People. The horrors resulting from segregation have been considered from their social and moral points of view in such treatments of the subject as are found in Henry C. Link's *The Rediscovery of Morals* and in the report of former President Truman's Committee on Civil Rights, entitled "To Secure These Rights." This matter has been the theme of a number of movies, outstanding among which is probably Louis de Rochemont's "Lost Boundaries."

Today, however, we propose to proceed beyond this point. We want to throw the bright searchlight of a significant New Testament document on this whole question as we discuss "Human Relations According to St. Paul's Letter to the Ephesians." From a Christian point of view, dealing with a problem such as this in the white light of God's revealed will is, of course, the most penetrating probe that can be undertaken.

The Letter to the Ephesians is of particular significance in the area of human relations because the major theme of the book is unity in Christ. "Ephesians" presents the basic structure which humanity needs for the expression of any kind of truly communal life acceptable to God. Its theme is the Church; and the Church is here represented as the universal community intended and designed by God to transcend and embrace all differences of race, station, and sex. The book addresses itself to the problem of human relations with a phrase which is found in verse fourteen of chapter two and which represents our present theme, namely,

#### "THE MIDDLE WALL OF PARTITION"

This expression owes its origin to the presence of a wall which divided the inner court of the Temple at Jerusalem from the outer courtyard. The sanctuary was open only to Jews; Gentiles dared go no farther than the wall that enclosed it. From Josephus we know that bilingual inscriptions, in both Latin and Greek, were placed at regular intervals along this wall, warning Gentiles not to enter the sanctuary itself. One of these inscriptions was found some seventy-five years ago during some excavations made on the site of the Temple. It reads: "No man of another race is to proceed within the partition and enclosing wall about the sanctuary; and anyone arrested there will have himself to blame for the penalty of death which will be imposed as a consequence."<sup>2</sup>

You may recall that as the result of an alleged breach of this regulation a tumult had once arisen in Jerusalem over St. Paul himself, who was thought to have taken Trophimus into the inner precincts (Acts 21:28 f.). Partly perhaps as an echo of this personal experience the Apostle uses this expression of the "middle wall of partition," derived as it was from an arrangement and practice of religious exclusiveness, to point up a problem in segregation

that had developed very early in the experience of the Christian Church. It was a difficulty, a source of irritation and enmity, so serious that it at times threatened to tear Christian congregations completely apart. It involved nothing less than the question of the relationship of Jew to Gentile and of Gentile to Jew.

There were those among the Jews who insisted that an approved rapport could be created and developed only on the plane of total conformity to the precepts of Judaism. The consequent disturbance shook Christian congregations to their very foundations; and Paul himself had to exert the full weight of his Apostolic authority on a number of occasions to prevent total disaster for the cause of the Christian religion.

In a sense, God Himself had given occasion for that distinction between Jew and Gentile which Dr. Mackay, in his recent treatment of "Ephesians," calls "the sacred rift."<sup>3</sup> God had long ago reached into history to make one people His very own, to deal specifically and redemptively with it for the benefit of all mankind. At Mount Sinai, shortly after the Exodus, the Lord had said to this race, "Ye shall be a peculiar treasure unto Me above all people" (Ex. 19:5). In this way He had separated Israel from the nations of the world. However, He had done so only for the purpose of making this one people His vehicle for healing a greater breach that still runs through both the supernatural and the natural world, separating Satan and man from God, and man from his fellow man.

In time Israel had forgotten the motivation behind God's action. As the seed of Abraham the Hebrew race developed what the Apostle called a carnal pride, an attitude of heart and mind which looked with disdain upon "lesser breeds without the Law." Frequently this very air of superiority and exclusiveness, by way of reaction, aroused intense feelings of anti-Semitism on the part of the Gentiles.

Jewish disdain and Gentile animosity constituted a major threat to the Apostolic Church. There was a tendency on both sides to construct a "middle wall of partition" in the assembly of believers. In his Letter to the Ephesians the Apostle emphasizes the fact that this wall, although still a built-in architectural feature of the Temple, had been broken down in its spiritual and social sense by none other than Jesus Himself. This meant that the distinction between

Jew and Gentile had been removed as a barrier to mutual fellowship. Both were now one in Christ.

This stirring truth St. Paul describes as "the mystery of God's will," which had been hidden from previous generations, but was now revealed to him and through him to the members of Christ's Church (3:3). Jew and Gentile were both to form part of a new commonwealth of heaven and earth. God's grace was working itself out in history in such a way as to gather in of every kind. Since the resurrection of Christ the Church had become the embodiment of God's unifying purpose for mankind.

The Letter to the Ephesians examines the problem of group segregation and individual isolation in the light of this revealed mystery. It does not overlook the enmities existing among men. It reckons with them realistically but points to a power that transcends and reconciles them.

Man's hatred of man, as practiced in many and devious ways, is nothing superficial. It cannot be explained adequately by pointing only to social, economic, or political factors. It is part of a cosmic rift. It reflects a cleavage that runs right through the universe. Behind, and at the source of, human enmity, prejudice, and segregation are the great powers of darkness described by the Apostle as "spiritual hosts of wickedness in the heavenly places" (6:12).

These "heavenlies," as J. Armitage Robinson tells us in his superb treatment of this Letter, are "the sphere of spiritual activities: that immaterial region, the 'unseen universe', which lies behind the world of sense." "In it," Robinson continues, "great forces are at work: forces which are conceived of as having in part transgressed against that order, and so having become disordered: forces which in part are opposed to us and wrestle against us. . . ." <sup>4</sup>

These hosts are thought of as personal beings led by one who is called "the prince of the power of the air" (2:2). They produce on earth a fierce enmity, separating men both from God and from their fellow human beings. Man's embittered social relationships are interpreted by the Apostle as being part of a great rebellion against God, instigated by Satan and joined by man.

Early in their history, by their spiritual malfeasance, men destroyed that fellowship and unity for which God had created them. Cain was soon on his way to "the land of Nod, on the east of Eden,"

a fugitive from society (Gen. 4:16). The great attempt undertaken a little later to erect a tower to the glory of man, which would be a perpetual monument to man's divinity and an abiding center of human unity, actually resulted, as you will recall, in a babel of languages and the dispersion of races.

In short, the Apostle traces the vices of hatred, animosity, and prejudice to their source, through man's evil heart back to the principalities and powers that rule in the sons of disobedience. He does not stop there, however. Of this rift, cleaving heaven and earth and man from man, he says that it has been done away with by the Cross, which is now to serve as a new unifying principle among men.

Christ was crucified, to be sure, by human hatred; but, in His dying, hatred itself was slain.<sup>5</sup> The effect of Christ's work of redemption is described in the Letter to the Ephesians as the creation of a new community, embracing two apparently irreconcilable segments of humanity, Jew and Gentile. God Himself is here revealed as providing a rallying-center for men of all races and nations and tongues. The exact words read as follows:

For He is Himself our peace. He has united the two into one and has broken down the middle wall of partition. In His flesh He put an end to the feud between us and abolished the Law with its rules and regulations, in order to create out of the two parties one new man by uniting them with Himself and so effecting peace. He did this to kill the feud between them by the cross and in one body to reconcile them both to God with it (2:14-16).

This unity to which we have been called by the Cross of Christ is not just an inward unity, content to remain aloof from life's problems. God's mercy toward us cannot be relegated to the world of ideas only. He acted in history, and He expects us to do the same. There is very little room in His Kingdom for mere spectators. There are no bleachers from which to observe the battle or the race. Our place is in the middle of events. As Dr. Mackay tells us: "Only when the spectator becomes a wayfarer upon the highway of God's purposes, only when he is willing to identify himself with God's great scheme of things as it is revealed in the Bible, is he capacitated to understand the Bible way of looking at things."<sup>6</sup>

The real point of "Ephesians" is just this, that by our outward performance we match the inward unity described there in full and glowing terms. Lest there be any mistake along this line, the Apostle lists the Christian virtues that preserve and manifest the unity of the Spirit at work in the Church (4:1-3). He calls on us to practice them. This is what he writes:

Therefore I, the prisoner in the Lord, exhort you to live lives worthy of the call you have received: with every expression of humility and gentleness, with the practice of patience, bearing with each other in love (4:1-3).

The first of the virtues here listed by the Apostle is humility. This is a word which the Christian religion has salvaged from its pagan associations to express that frame of mind which recognizes God's greatness and man's littleness. Humility looks to all of God's undeserved blessings and falls upon its knees in gratitude. It is a quality of life which we learn in imitation of Christ, of whom we read that "He humbled Himself and became obedient unto death, even the death of the cross" (Phil. 2:8).

In the realm of human relations humility is a cohesive, rather than a divisive, force, for it recognizes the lordship of Christ over all of His followers. It joins all the other redeemed children in adoration of God for His many mercies toward us. It "subordinates itself instead of lording it over the brethren."<sup>7</sup>

The virtue of meekness, or gentleness, which is mentioned next, is opposed to all forms of self-assertion. In the relations of men with their fellow men meekness is of great significance; hence the Beatitudes say: "Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth" (Matt. 5:5). This is the gentleness of our Savior, who reached out to the lost and condemned in order to help them.

We have lived long enough with people of various kinds to realize that self-assertion is one of the sources of misunderstanding, irritation, and animosity. The man who asserts himself is usually not very sensitive to the rights and interests of others. He is aggressive in the sense of wanting his own way, regardless. Now, meekness starts at the other end of this relationship. It recognizes the priority of other men's needs.

The Apostle goes on to speak of the practice of patience. This has to do with endurance in the face of provocation. However, it is

a little more than that. The word might be translated as "long-suffering." It connotes the refusal to give up hope for improvement in any disturbed relationship that might arise. God Himself is spoken of as long-suffering toward us, "not willing that any should perish, but that all should come to repentance" (2 Peter 3:4). He puts up with our individual faults and peculiarities, our acts of pride and self-assertion, which threaten our relationship with Him, in the hope that in the presence of His unmeasured grace we may become humble and meek. This kind of long-suffering we are to practice in the field of human relations.

All of these suggestions might be summed up in two words, "Copy God" (5:1). From that point we proceed to what is the climax in the series of suggestions the Apostle makes. We are to bear with one another in love, he writes. This statement implies a tacit recognition of the fact that personal differences and strains will and do develop as men live with one another, also in the Christian community. In this situation we are to learn of Christ and practice love. "Love" is a word used of God's actions toward us. We did not deserve His kindness. In fact, St. Paul is very emphatic in his inspired assertions that we were enemies of God, in open rebellion against Him, when He sent us His only Son. The very "middle wall of partition" we have referred to is described in "Ephesians" as having its source in enmity toward God; and yet God in His love broke it down from the other side through the Cross.

Love, then, is an act of the will. It is not aroused or motivated by anything desirable or lovable in its object. It is "spontaneous and uncaused."<sup>8</sup> That kind of love we are to show in bearing with one another. It is an active outgoing of ourselves toward others, especially toward those who need our concern and our attention, thus creating community.

We are reminded here of a point in Bruce Marshall's *Father Malachy's Miracle*. On the opening pages of the book Father Malachy is introduced as he takes his seat in the compartment on an English train. Hardly had he settled himself when there entered a fat man with a face "so red and pouchy that it looked like a bladder painted to hit people over the head with at an Italian carnival." Shortly thereafter a middle-aged woman climbed into



the same part of the train. Father Malachy noticed she had a "peaky, shiny nose with a funny little dent in the middle." As he gazed upon his fellow passengers "the little clergyman" decided he had best close his eyes. He must love his neighbors; and it would be easier, he was sure, to love them without looking at them.<sup>9</sup> Let us say for Bruce Marshall's creation that he understood in large measure the nature and requirements of love as the New Testament uses the word!

The qualities of heart and mind described by the words "humility," "meekness," "patience," and "love" are part of God's new creation. They reflect His desire for unity and fellowship among His children. Precisely for that reason those who begin to practice these virtues come under fierce attack from those principalities, powers, and "world rulers of darkness" whose delight is in friction, chaos, disintegration, and destruction. Hence the Apostle commands us to reach for the panoply of God consisting of the girdle of truth, the breastplate of righteousness, the sandals of the Gospel of peace, the shield of faith, the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit (6:14-16).

There is something paradoxical about this picture of a warrior, equipped with the Gospel of peace. However, that is our situation. To establish the peace of God we must do battle, not against one another on account of race or color, but against those beings and powers "in the heavenlies" that disturb and destroy God's peace among us.

Our battle is a way of life, the practice of Christ's virtues in life's many relationships — at home. On the business frontier, in all of our dealings with one another and those who may not yet be fellow citizens of God's new commonwealth. We are to show toward the outside that inward unity which God creates in Christ Jesus. If we are humble, gentle, long-suffering, and loving, we "strive to preserve the unity in the spirit by the bond of peace" (4:4). This last quotation is a bridge passage to a few verses in "Ephesians" which once more present the creative and unifying power of God in the Church. We read:

There is one body and one Spirit, just as you are called in one hope of your calling. There is one Lord, one faith, one Baptism, one God and Father of all, who is above us all, pervades us all, and is within us all (4:4-6).

"One . . . one . . . one" — the word is repeated seven times in this short section to stress not only the fact of our oneness in God but of our responsibility to reflect this being one with Him. Each time this word "one" is attached to a noun: body, spirit, hope, Lord, faith, Baptism, God. Christianity is inescapably communal, centered in Christ under God. In His presence there cannot be separation and segregation, prejudice and discrimination.

And so the Letter to the Ephesians exalts the Church as the means of removing the "middle wall of partition." It speaks of Christ in His cosmic significance. Of Him we read that all things will be brought together under Him. This gathering process and its result are called "the fullness of Him that fills all things." Here is a great multitude; here is the whole people of God. They are the members of His body, supporting one another, ministering to one another's needs, and, as one, serving the Lord, who is their Head.

"Ephesians" describes our unity in Christ not only in terms of a body, but also under the figure of a temple — not like the one in Jerusalem with its "middle wall of partition" — but a new kind of dwelling place for God, built of living stones joined together and founded on Apostles and Prophets, Jesus Christ Himself being the Cornerstone. This sacred edifice is described as being in the process of creation to serve as a permanent residence for that God whose gracious presence had been withdrawn from the first Holy of Holies.

The Apostle resorts, moreover, to the concept of the family to underline the unity found and to be practiced in the Church. He speaks of those from afar and of those who are near as all belonging to the household of God. This description is of even greater significance than St. Paul's statement on Mars Hill: "God hath made of one blood all nations of men to dwell on all the face of the earth" (Acts 17:26). The Church is a redeemed community. It is a creation of God's grace and not merely the product of His providence. We were ordained to be His sons by adoption through Jesus Christ (1:5). All of us, black, yellow, red, and white, have access to God's throne of grace and can join in the family prayer "Our Father" (2:18). There cannot be any longer among us a "middle wall of partition."

This does not imply colorless uniformity. God does not destroy our personalities to make us His sons. He does not eradicate our

racial, social, and cultural backgrounds. Each of us, for what we are, is given God's grace to come into this household, repenting and in faith. The Church is not a monolithic society, composed of men *en masse*. God does not look upon us in terms of the party leader who delights to have before him the "great grey face" of the masses. He wants each of us for what we can individually become under the influence of His Spirit; and to that end He invites us into His fellowship, the Church, to serve Him in Christ, destroying the "dividing wall of hostility," as the Revised Standard Version translates our theme phrase, the partition that separates a man from his brother especially when he is of another color.

Wyston Hugh Auden has a few lines in his "Christmas Oratorio" which reflect the unifying influence of God's love toward men. He brings the Wise Men from the East and the shepherds from Bethlehem's plains together at the Manger and has them say:

Released by Love from isolating wrong,  
Let us, for Love, unite our various song,  
Each with his gift according to his kind  
Bringing this Child his body and his mind.<sup>10</sup>

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