

# Discipleship Values

There are some sports where we can participate as individuals, such as athletics. But, there are also plenty of sports which involve being part of a team. This requires a level of commitment and accountability to the team, including attending training. Additionally, it requires us to be aware of those around us and to respond appropriately, as we fulfil our particular position and role in that team. This week's study focusses on the discipleship value of 'inclusive community'. Discipleship is something we do in the context of a community of faith, that inevitably includes a diverse range of people. Both Jews and Gentiles in the church at Ephesus struggled with the issue of inclusion and we can learn from the apostle Paul's response.

**ICEBREAKER:** Some of us (or our friends or family members) were subjected to 'name calling' and bullying at school. If you are comfortable with sharing this information: what was a name that was used against you, a friend or a member of your family? What do you think the bully was trying to achieve by their behaviour? What was the result for the person on the receiving end?

## **READ: EPH 2:10-22**

In Eph 2:11, there is an indication that 'name calling' was part of the relationship dynamics between 1<sup>st</sup> Century Jews ("the circumcised") and Gentiles ("the uncircumcised"). For centuries, the Jews had routinely practised circumcision of male infants on the child's 8<sup>th</sup> day. They also circumcised adult men who converted to Judaism. The Jews prided themselves on this distinctive practice. Farley notes that, "It marked their commitment to and entrance into the covenant relationship with Yahweh. Unfortunately, as noted by Jeremiah 4:4 and in Deuteronomy 10:16; 30:6, many of the natural Jews were circumcised physically, but failed to realize the symbolic and spiritual significance of the act."<sup>1</sup>

- Read Eph 2:12. What did the Gentiles miss out on when they were 'outsiders'?
- Why do you think that Paul wanted the Gentile Christians to "remember" what they had been and what they had missed out on?

In any synagogue, there would have been Gentiles who were 'God-fearers', but weren't full converts. "These Gentiles were sympathetic to Judaism and interested in at least some of its teachings. They might have attended the local synagogues and adhered to some of the Jewish dietary restrictions. Some of them might have observed the Sabbath as a day of rest or even have studied the Torah. However, most scholars think they would have drawn the line at circumcision."<sup>2</sup> But, circumcision was a requirement of "the law with its commandments and regulations". (Eph 2:15)

- In what way was circumcision a "barrier" for the Gentiles, (Eph 2:14) converting to Judaism?
- In what way were Jewish attitudes towards the Gentiles, also like a "dividing wall of hostility"?

In Eph 2:4-9, Paul focussed on the character of God: his great love, his rich mercy, kindness and grace. He highlighted the work of God in making us alive with Christ, saving us and seating "us with him in the heavenly realms". In Eph 2:1-3, he noted that both Jews and Gentiles were 'objects of wrath' and none of us deserved this salvation. Then, in Eph 2:8-9, Paul wrote the words: "For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith - and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God - not by works, **so that no one can boast**. In Christ, both Jews and Gentiles have been not only created, but also re-created, to do good works that God has pre-planned for us to do. (Eph 2:10)

The issue of circumcision had been used by the Jews, to rationalise an attitude of "we're better than you".

- Why do you think that Paul started his discussion on Christian unity in Eph 2 by talking about the total depravity of all human beings and the need for all of us to be saved by grace not by works?

<sup>1</sup> Farley, Gary E. "D. Rite of passage." In *The Zondervan Pictorial Encyclopedia of the Bible: Volume 1, A-C*. Pradis CD-ROM:Articles/C/Circumcision/I. Theories of origin./D. Rite of passage.. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, © 1975, 1976.

<sup>2</sup> [http://www.biblewise.com/bible\\_study/questions/god-fearers.php](http://www.biblewise.com/bible_study/questions/god-fearers.php)

- READ Rom 10:11-14. What are the universal needs of all people, whether Jew and Gentile?
- READ Eph 3:1-3,6. What knowledge had been revealed to Paul? What did he do about it?
- Compare Eph 2:12 and Eph 3:6: what is the difference for us, between what we were and are now? Underline the words that stand out for you.  
Eph 2:12 *“remember that at that time you [ie Gentiles] **were** separate from Christ, excluded from citizenship in Israel and foreigners to the covenants of the promise, without hope and without God in the world.”*  
Eph 3:6 *“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.”*

In Eph 2:14, Paul uses parallel ideas of a ‘barrier’ and a ‘wall’. While there was no ‘physical’ wall between the Jews and the Gentiles, there was a definite psychological barrier, grounded in the Jew’s understanding of them being ‘set apart’ and holy. Jewish people grew up being taught to avoid touching and associating with things and people that were deemed ‘unclean’. They understood the need for regular washing, sacrifices and ‘cleansing’ to purify themselves. The attitudes of Jesus’ disciples (eg when they found Jesus talking to the Samaritan women in Jn 4) gives us an insight into their cultural mindset. The Jews conveyed an attitude of contempt and superiority towards the Gentiles and the Gentiles reciprocated the hostility.

- In Eph 2:14-16, what 6 or 7 things does Paul note that Jesus has done, through his death and resurrection?
- In Eph 2:17-22: What does this work of Jesus mean for Jews and Gentiles who are ‘in Christ’?
- Read Rom 15:7-11. What is the command given in verse 7? How easy or hard do you think that would have been in the 1<sup>st</sup> Century church – given that racial and religious prejudices would have still been felt – and expressed at different times - between the Jews and Gentiles?

In Rom 12:9-13 (NLT), we read:

*“Don’t just pretend to love others. Really love them. Hate what is wrong. Hold tightly to what is good. Love each other with genuine affection, and take delight in honouring each other. Never be lazy, but work hard and serve the Lord enthusiastically. Rejoice in our confident hope. Be patient in trouble, and keep on praying. When God’s people are in need, be ready to help them. Always be eager to practice hospitality.”*

- The apostle Paul was writing to 1<sup>st</sup> Century churches which were, by nature, ethnically, culturally and religiously diverse. In these verses, what practical things did he command people in these churches to do, to ensure that churches were inclusive communities?

In a recent Christianity Today article, Craig Keener made the following comment:

*“... Paul and other New Testament writers sacrificed deeply for the church’s unity. A unity propelled by love means that we love and serve our brothers and sisters even if our perspectives differ starkly. It is the good news about Christ that makes us one body, and we have no right to sunder his body. If we are prepared to lay down our lives for one another, we surely should be able to endure our differences, even while working toward what we believe to be justice and truth. The beginning of reconciliation is listening to one another’s honest feelings and experiences and then loving and serving, even when our disagreements feel painful. I realised I needed to follow what I myself was teaching and sacrifice for the unity of the church.”<sup>3</sup>*

Keener highlights that Christian unity is not easy and that it needs all of us to work hard to make space for brothers and sisters in Christ, who are different to us.

**REFLECT, SHARE & PRAY:** Have you met any new people at church recently? What things can you do, to make space for them and help them be included in our community?

<sup>3</sup> [http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2018/january-web-only/why-i-almost-left-evangelicalism.html?utm\\_source=ctweekly-html&utm\\_medium=Newsletter&utm\\_term=21700307&utm\\_content=563772479&utm\\_campaign=email](http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2018/january-web-only/why-i-almost-left-evangelicalism.html?utm_source=ctweekly-html&utm_medium=Newsletter&utm_term=21700307&utm_content=563772479&utm_campaign=email)