

## **Overcoming Tribalism**

### **By David Feddes**

Of all the problems that threaten humanity, tribalism is one of the worst. Tribalism is caring only about your own tribe and nobody else. Tribalism is fear of anyone outside your own tribe or group, hatred for people of a different background, contempt for anyone who seems foreign to us. Tribalism is an allergic reaction to anyone different. Tribalism is seeing people of another race or group as enemies. Tribalism can be deadly, and it is contagious. It sweeps through groups and tribes and infects entire nations with hatred.

The results are dreadful. When you're tribalistic, you stop thinking straight: you judge people by the color of their skin or the name of their tribe or the place of their birth, rather than looking at who they really are. You become paranoid and irrational. Whenever anything goes wrong, you blame it on those strange people you don't like, and you think they're hatching some kind of secret plot. Tribalism muddies the mind and strangles the soul.

Tribalism has an awful effect on the hater, and beyond that, of course, there's the damage to those who are hated. Just look at the twentieth century: the Turkish slaughter of the Armenians early in the century, the Nazi destruction of six million Jews in the middle of the century, the tribal massacres in Rwanda and Bosnia near the end of the twentieth century. As the twenty-first century began, many thousands in the Darfur region of the Sudan have been murdered because of ethnic and religious conflict. Tribal tensions have brought danger and death to Nigeria and other nations. Those are just a few examples of how murderous tribalism can be.

How can we overcome tribalism? How can we defeat racism and suspicion and ethnic strife? That's one of the most pressing questions in the world today. In Western Europe, there's hostility to immigrants and guest workers. In Eastern Europe and the Balkans, old hatreds exploded with renewed cruelty after the collapse of communism. Canada has ongoing tensions among French speakers and English speakers and aboriginal peoples—differences that various politicians have tried and failed to resolve. And in the United States, racial tension is not yet a thing of the past. It enters into hiring practices, bank loans, home purchases, and law enforcement. Accusations fly back and forth of racism and reverse racism. Even university campuses, which are supposed to be bastions of understanding and tolerance, are afflicted by racial incidents. So tribalism is a problem we can't afford to ignore. But what can be done about it?

### **Trying Segregation and Integration**

Segregation doesn't work. There have been those who thought the best way to prevent conflict was to keep different groups apart and prevent the different factions from mingling. But segregation doesn't prevent conflict; it promotes it. In the United States "separate but equal" turned out not to be very equal. In South Africa, apartheid drew boundary lines that turned out to be battle lines. Too often, segregation defines justice as "just us." It doesn't remove tribalism; it makes it official policy.

Segregation doesn't work, so what about integration? Maybe if different peoples are mixed together and live side by side for a while, they'll learn to appreciate each other. Well, Serbs and Bosnians were forced to live side by side for more than forty

years under communist rule, but the hatred remained. Integration is not enough. Hutus and Tutsis lived side by side in Rwanda, but mistrust and hatred only grew stronger. Integration is not enough. In Nigeria and in other African countries, people from many different tribes were brought together under a national government, and persons from different tribes flocked to huge cities and mingled there, but blending can sometimes lead to conflict. Integration is not enough. In the United States, after decades of civil rights legislation, forced busing, and greater integration, racial hostility is still a problem. Integration is not enough.

Just because people go to the same schools, ride the same buses, live in the same neighborhoods, shop in the same malls, or work in the same factories, doesn't mean they'll become friends. Political and social integration is not enough. It's naive to assume that the more people have to do with each other, the more they'll like each other. Just as often, the more they're together, the more they hate each other.

Integration doesn't cure tribalism. That's not to deny the importance of civil rights and equal opportunity. But those things aren't enough. They can take us only so far. Replacing an old policy with a new policy still won't replace hatred with love. The deepest problem isn't legal or social; it's spiritual. We need more than new laws; we need new hearts.

### **Breaking Down Barriers**

We need the gospel of Jesus. The gospel declares that Jesus saves people from every tribe and language and people and nation and makes us one in him. Jesus breaks down barriers of hostility. Jesus reconciles us to God, and he reconciles us to each other. Jesus unites people who are utterly different.

At the time the New Testament books of the Bible were written, tribalism was as much a problem as it is today. The Roman Empire brought many different nationalities under one political system. The empire covered a vast, multi-ethnic area, and brought many different peoples into contact with each other. But political integration didn't bring unity or understanding.

There was a sharp division between Romans and non-Romans. Romans gloried in their status as the world's only superpower. Rome gave her own citizens rights that nobody else had. They had little regard for the people whose territory they occupied, and the occupied peoples hated them right back.

And then there were the Greeks. They saw just two kinds of people in the world: Greeks and barbarians. The Greeks had a legacy of brilliant philosophy and art and culture, and they knew it. The Greeks had culture; everybody else was barbarian. In their eyes, it was that simple.

There were many other ethnic divisions as well, but perhaps the most serious, from the Bible's perspective, was the division between Jews and non-Jews, also called Gentiles. Many Gentiles were anti-Jewish. The emperor Claudius once expelled all Jews who were living in Rome. Gentiles were anti-Jewish, and many Jews despised Gentiles and commonly spoke of them as "dogs." They refused to eat with Gentiles or stay in their homes.

Amid all this division and hatred, the gospel of Jesus Christ burst forth and exploded the barriers. The apostle Peter was a Jew living under Roman occupation, but God led Peter to present the gospel to Cornelius, an officer in the Roman army. Peter

baptized this Gentile "dog" and his entire family into the church, and he even stayed at Cornelius' house a few days (Acts 10). Earlier, the Jewish evangelist Phillip led a black government official from Ethiopia to become a fellow believer in Christ (Acts 8:26-40).

And then there was Paul, a Jew who prided himself on his Jewishness and had little use for non-Jews. After Paul became a Christian, Jesus sent him to tell the gospel to Gentiles. Paul brought Christ to the Greek businesswoman Lydia. Paul preached to a gathering of Greek intellectuals. Paul preached to Roman government officials. Paul planted multi-ethnic churches throughout Asia and Europe.

Over and over, the gospel brought the most unlikely people together. Ethnic barriers fell: Jews and Greeks and Romans and Asians and Africans were baptized into the same faith. Social barriers fell: slaves and merchants and government officials and fishermen worshipped together in the same churches. As the apostle Paul put it, "Here there is no Greek or Jew, circumcised or uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave or free, but Christ is all, and is in all" (Colossians 3:11). People of different backgrounds followed the same Lord Jesus, and they sought to live by Jesus' words: "By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another" (John 13:35)

How can the gospel take people who seemed to have nothing in common but fear, hatred, and disgust for each other, and make them one? The Bible tells us in Ephesians 2. The chapter has two main sections. The first half of Ephesians 2 shows how Jesus removes the barrier between God and us, and the second half shows how Jesus removes the barrier that separates people of different tribes or nations. Notice the order here: First reconciliation with God, then reconciliation among people.

### **Reconciled to God**

Let's look first at our relationship to God. The Bible shows that whatever our racial and tribal differences might be, we've all got the same basic problem, and we all need the exact same solution. Paul begins Ephesians 2 by telling his readers, "As for you, you were dead in your transgressions and sins." Paul says they were controlled by the power of Satan. And he applies that not just to his readers but to himself. "*All of us*," says Paul, "also lived among them at one time, gratifying the cravings of our sinful nature and following its desires and thoughts. Like the rest, we were by nature objects of wrath." It's a grim picture: dead in sin, dominated by Satan, slaves of selfishness, objects of God's wrath—all of us!

But [says the Bible] because of his great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, made us alive in Christ even when we were dead in transgressions—it is by grace you have been saved. And God raised us up with Christ and seated us with him in the heavenly realms in Christ Jesus, in order that in the coming ages he might show the incomparable riches of his grace, expressed in his kindness to us in Christ Jesus. For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—not by works, so that no one can boast.

It's only God's grace, his undeserved kindness, that saves us. Apart from Jesus' death and resurrection, we're goners, all of us. We've all got the same basic problem, and we all need the same salvation. No one is in a position to look down on anyone else. The ground is level at the foot of the cross. It's Jesus' blood that makes us right with God, not our ancestry, our tribe, our culture, or anything else about us. In Christ there is no

black or white, no Arab or Jew, no Asian or Latino, no Yoruba or Ibo, no Hausa or Tiv, no immigrant or native, rich or poor, but only sinners saved by God's grace and made one in Christ Jesus.

"By grace you have been saved, through faith"—is that true of you? Jesus Christ is the only one who can remove the barrier between you and God. He died and rose again to do that. He's the only one who can take away your sin. He's the only one who can give you the incomparable riches of eternal life. If you haven't already put your faith in Christ, you need to do so. No matter who you are, no matter where you were born, no matter your race or nationality, you're no different from anyone else. You need Jesus. You need to admit that without him, you're dead in sin, you're under Satan's power, you're full of selfish desires, and you deserve God's wrath. Then you need to believe that salvation is a free gift of God's grace in Jesus Christ. You need to accept that gift for yourself personally, trusting that what Christ did, he did for you. At that point, you become a new creation in Christ. You start doing good works which God has been preparing in advance for you to do (v. 10). Have you put your faith in Jesus? According to Ephesians 2, that's the only way you or I can be reconciled to God.

### **Reconciled to Each Other**

Once Christ reconciles us to God, he reconciles us to each other. He brings people from very different backgrounds together and makes them one in him. The second half of Ephesians 2 shows how Christ breaks down barriers, in particular the barrier between Jew and Gentile.

We talked earlier about Romans, Greeks, barbarians, and so forth, and how they despised each other. These divisions were based on pride and fear and bigotry. But the barrier between Jew and Gentile was different. Certainly, there was needless prejudice, but it wasn't just a matter of human prejudice. It was also God's choice. The Lord had called Abraham and Isaac and Jacob and their descendants as a special people for himself. It was God who distinguished the Hebrews, the Jews, from all others through the ritual of circumcision and through the laws he gave to Moses. It was God who sent his prophets only to the Israelites. And so, in a sense, the Jews were correct when they thought of themselves as a people set apart by God.

But according to Ephesians 2, all that has changed. The barrier between Jew and Gentile has been demolished in Christ. You see, God didn't choose the Jews just for their own sake, but so that all the nations of the earth might be blessed through them. God didn't give the law of Moses and the various prophecies only to favor the Jews, but as the first step toward his ultimate purpose, which was yet to come, of blessing all nations with the light of his grace and truth.

God's choice of the Jewish people reached its fulfillment in Jesus the Messiah. The sign of circumcision was no longer important. The sacrifices and rituals of the law of Moses were no longer necessary. These ceremonies and signs were fulfilled in the ultimate sacrifice on the cross. The revelation of God's ways was no longer confined to Jewish people; Jesus commanded his disciples to preach the gospel to all nations.

Everything that had previously kept Gentiles from being part of God's special people was wiped out at the cross, and people of every nation who trusted Christ were to be welcomed and given the exact same status, whether Jew or Gentile—whether Greek or Roman or African or Asian or Native American, or whatever. It no longer made

any difference; the only thing that mattered was Christ. Ephesians 2:14 says, "For he himself is our peace, who has made the two one and has destroyed the barrier, the dividing wall of hostility." The gospel announced peace with God to everyone on the same terms: faith in the crucified and risen Christ. And in placing everyone on the same ground before God, it placed them on the same ground with each other.

### **No Longer Foreigners**

At the end of Ephesians 2, in verses 19-22, God shows us the privileges we can have through faith in Christ and the unity we have with fellow Christians of every language and race and nation. We're no longer strangers or foreigners to each other. God shows us this in three word pictures: we're citizens of his kingdom, we're members of his family, and we're building blocks in his temple. Here's what the Bible says:

Consequently, you are no longer foreigners and aliens, but fellow citizens with God's people and members of God's household, built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the chief cornerstone. In him the whole building is joined together and rises to become a holy temple in the Lord. And in him you too are being built together to become a dwelling in which God lives by his Spirit.

Think of it! In Christ there are no foreigners, only fellow citizens of God's kingdom. In Christ there are no strangers, only brothers and sisters in the family of God. In Christ our ethnic differences aren't ugly barriers; they're the beautiful variety of materials which God uses to build a splendid temple for himself.

We're *fellow citizens* with all God's people. We're not foreigners; we're not illegal aliens; we're not on a temporary visa; we're citizens. We belong. Christ is our ruler and the Bible is our constitution. There are no second class citizens. If you've been a Christian for two months, you're just as much a citizen as the one who's been a Christian for sixty years. If you're of a different nationality than most of the people in your church, you're still just as much a citizen as they are.

In God's kingdom, no one has any more or any less rights than anyone else. All of us have the right to the freedom Christ purchased for us. All of us have the right to appeal directly to our Lord in prayer. All of us have the right to be affirmed as full citizens of the Kingdom. The Bible says, "God does not show favoritism but accepts men from every nation who fear him and do what is right" (Acts 10:34-35). Racism and tribalism have no place in the church of Christ. We're fellow citizens.

And that's not all. We're not only citizens of the same kingdom, but we're members of the same family; we're *brothers and sisters* in God's household. The church of Christ is a place where the same ruler gives us the same rights, but it's also a place where the same Father embraces us with the same love. He has adopted people from every tribe and language and people and nation into his family.

If you're a parent with little children, maybe you've been asked, "Who do you love the most, me or my sister?" What do you say? "I love all of you the same." The children are all different—this variety is the spice of family life—but all are special to you. One is not loved more or less than the next. That's how it is in God's family. Sometimes, we'd like to think that God has favorites—and we're it. "Who do you love more, Lord, me or my sister? Me or my brother? My nation or a different nation? My tribe or that other tribe?" But in God's household, all are loved with an everlasting love. The Lord loves

each of us enough to die for us. He loves each of us enough to share the family fortune with us. He gives to all his children everlasting life and incomparable riches.

What's more, the Lord even gives us the right to reign with him. In God's household, you're the daughter of a King, and that makes you a princess. You're the son of a King, and that makes you a prince. The Bible says that we will judge the world; we will even judge the angels (1 Corinthians 6:2-3). We will reign with Christ forever and ever (Revelation 22:5).

That's all part of belonging to God's household, and that means we need to affirm and respect and love each other. I need to treat every Christian I meet as a brother or sister, as a fellow prince or princess. I can't pretend that God loves one more than another. We're brothers and sisters in Christ, loved by the same Father, destined for the same great inheritance, members of the same household.

And finally, according to Ephesians 2, we're all part of the same magnificent building project. God uses many different building materials, with many colors shapes and sizes, to build a temple for himself. He takes the cultural differences that once caused separation and makes them a cause for celebration. He turns barriers into building blocks.

So instead of trying to force all cultures to become like our own, we can celebrate the splendid variety of people that God builds into his temple. We rejoice in unity, not uniformity. We're not all the same; we're different. But we have the same foundation, the gospel message of the prophets and apostles recorded in the Bible, and we're all held together by the same cornerstone, our Lord Jesus Christ. With all our variety, we "are being built together to become a dwelling place in which God lives by his Spirit."

Citizens of the same kingdom, members of the same family, parts of the same temple—Christ brings unity in our diversity. Trust in Jesus! He is the cure for the tribalism that sickens our souls and divides our world. Jesus is life and joy for all who are excluded and despised. Jesus has broken down the barriers between God and us. Jesus has broken down the barriers between different groups of people. Live in his love!

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