

IDENTIFYING AND UNDERSTANDING BIBLE WORD PICTURES

Track 9 – Lining Up the Word Pictures in Ephesians 2

Introduction/Relevance

Ephesians 2:8-10 is a passage in the Bible that has long been used by evangelicals to talk about salvation “by grace through faith”. Let’s take a look:

- **Ephesians 2:** *8 For by grace you have been saved through faith, and that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God, 9 not of works, lest anyone should boast. 10 For we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand that we should walk in them.*

While this is a wonderful passage to focus on how God gives salvation by grace, verse 10 has created some problems because of its interpretation. “We are His workmanship” is commonly understood to refer to *individual believers*. In our culture, this interpretation is appealing; after all, don’t *each of us* want to think of ourselves as a new, *unique* creation in Christ? While individual believers are said to be a new creation with a new identity in Christ *in other passages* (i.e., 1 Thes. 5:5 and 2 Cor. 5:17), understanding Ephesians 2:10 that way creates another issue:

Perseverance theology has treated this verse as a prooftext for Calvin’s infamous 1547 dictum: “It is therefore faith alone which justifies [cf. Eph. 2:8-9], and yet the faith which justifies is not alone”¹ [per the Calvinist twisting of Eph. 2:10].

Calvinists imagine that Ephesians 2:10 teaches that all true believers will persevere in good works. They reason as follows:

1. Every believer is God’s workmanship.
2. God’s workmanship involves foreordaining certain works for each believer.
3. Every true believer necessarily will perform the works God foreordained.²

In other words, if Ephesians 2:10 refers to individual believers, then they must persevere in the works that God created them for (until the end of their lives!) in order to consider themselves “His workmanship”. That goes *far beyond* simply saying that God loves and favors us *uniquely*... If the standard Calvinist interpretation is correct, it will lead to the conclusion that Calvinist Steven Cole came to: “Thus, genuine salvation involves God creating something new. It inevitably results in *a life of good works* because God ordained such works before He saved us.”³ *But is that what Ephesians 2:10 is teaching?* Is the emphasis of the passage on individual believers? What can we learn from the context?

I hope that by the end of this discussion, you will agree that Ephesians 2:10 does *not* teach what is commonly taught, but actually teaches a much more beautiful and encouraging truth...

¹ John Calvin, *Antidote to the Council of Trent* (1547), https://www.monergism.com/thethreshold/sdg/calvin_trentantidote.html. Accessed 12April2023.

² John Niemelä, *We are His Masterpiece* (Ephesians 2:10), <https://faithalone.org/grace-in-focus-articles/we-are-his-masterpiece-ephesians-210>. Accessed 12April2023.

³ Steven J. Cole, *Lesson 15: Salvation and Good Works* (Ephesians 2:10), [Lesson 15: Salvation and Good Works](https://www.bible.org/lesson-15-salvation-and-good-works-ephesians-2-10) (Ephesians 2:10) | Bible.org. Accessed 12April2023.

The Context: Ephesians 2

As we walk through the 2nd chapter of Ephesians, we will find that “workmanship” is actually the 1st of three word pictures in the chapter. In order to understand *any* of them properly, they need to be seen and understood *together*. We’ve already seen how important *series of pictures* are in Matthew and Galatians.

There is something interesting to note, however, before we look more particularly at the word pictures. In Galatians 3-4, you may remember, Paul makes distinctions between “we/us”, “y’all”, and “they/them”. Here in Ephesians, if we read slowly, we will see that the emphasis is a distinction between “y’all” and “we/us”:

- **Ephesians 2:** *1 And y’all He made alive, who were dead in trespasses and sins, 2 in which y’all once walked according to the course of this world, according to the prince of the power of the air, the spirit who now works in the sons of disobedience, 3 among whom also we all once conducted ourselves in the lusts of our flesh, fulfilling the desires of the flesh and of the mind, and (we) were by nature children of wrath, just as the others. 4 But God, who is rich in mercy, because of His great love with which He loved us, 5 even when we were dead in trespasses, made us alive together with Christ (by grace you have been saved), 6 and raised us up together, and made us sit together in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus, 7 that in the ages to come He might show the exceeding riches of His grace in His kindness toward us in Christ Jesus.*
11 Therefore remember that y’all, once Gentiles in the flesh—who are called Uncircumcision by what is called the Circumcision made in the flesh by hands—12 that at that time y’all 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.⁴

From these verses, we can see that Paul is using “y’all” here to refer to the Ephesian believers who *were Gentiles*. This is especially clear in verses 11 and 12. But we will see that his use of “y’all” is *not* the focus of the passage! In verse 3, Paul uses “we” to include both himself and the Ephesian Gentile believers (“we all”). Beyond that, it was important for Paul to spell out that the “we” meant that “we” are “together”:

We/Us:	(ημας) Together!
He made (us) alive <i>together</i>	συνεζωοποιησεν
He raised (us) <i>together</i>	συνηγειρεν
He made (us) sit <i>together</i>	συνεκαθισεν

While some might read this and say, “Sure, the two ‘parties’ involved are believers and Jesus.” *But that doesn’t fit the context either.* If we take the time to see the chapter as a whole and look at the three word pictures in the chapter *together*, the “we” becomes very clear, and Paul’s focus also becomes clear.

The 1st Word Picture: Workmanship

After telling the Ephesian believers that they have been saved by grace through faith and that their salvation was not by works, he changes from “y’all” to “we” in verse 10; *why?* If his emphasis/focus was on the individual believer, he could have made that

⁴ While all scripture quotations are from the New King James Version, here I’ve used the southern form “y’all” to translate the plural form of “you”.

abundantly clear. In fact, if Paul wanted to focus on the individual, he could have written something like he wrote in 1st Corinthians 12:7-9:

- **1st Corinthians 12:7** *But the manifestation of the Spirit is given **to each one** for the profit of all: 8 for to one is given the word of wisdom through the Spirit, to another the word of knowledge through the same Spirit, 9 to another faith by the same Spirit, to another gifts of healings by the same Spirit, 10 to another the working of miracles, to another prophecy, to another discerning of spirits, to another different kinds of tongues, to another the interpretation of tongues. 11 But one and the same Spirit works all these things, distributing **to each one individually** as He wills.*

If the “good works” which God prepared were to be assigned to each individual believer, Paul certainly knew how to say so; he did not. He could have written, “Each of you are His workmanship,” but he did not. There is a reason! Paul writes that “we” (together!) are His workmanship (ποίημα). Another way to say that? A group of more than one has been made into one thing...

So, what is a “workmanship”? According to a major New Testament Greek dictionary, it is “that which is made, *work, creation*, in our literature *only of the works of divine creation.*”⁵ As a word picture, it would be the product of a craftsman, who takes different things and *puts them together* in a unique way that give *what is produced* his unique “signature” (like a masterpiece). “It denotes the result of work, *what is produced* as contrasted to *poiēsis* which is the act of making, the doing itself and not that which is made.”⁶ From the Greek word which is translated “workmanship,” transliterated *POIEMA*, you can see that we derive the English word “poem”. A *poem* is created when a writer takes different words and *puts them together* in unique ways...

This should help us see the picture that Paul is trying to “paint” for us. “We” are a unique creation made up of different parts that have been put together. What a wonderful thing God *created* when He put together the church!

In case there is any ambiguity in Paul’s argument in Ephesians 2, he will help us understand more clearly as he continues. He does so by giving us two more *word pictures*. This *series* of word pictures will help us answer the question: what did God put together to form His unique “workmanship”?

The 2nd Word Picture: One New Man

After saying, “We are His workmanship,” Paul draws a conclusion. He tells the Ephesian believers that they should remember what they were *before* they became part of God’s workmanship. Notice how he shifts back to “you” (“y’all”) in order to talk about their past:

- **Ephesians 2:11** *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**—12 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. 13 But now in Christ Jesus **you** who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ.*

⁵ Arndt, William et al. *A Greek-English lexicon of the New Testament and other early Christian literature* 2000: 842. Print.

⁶ Zodhiates, Spiros. “ποίημα *poiēma*,” *The complete word study dictionary: New Testament* 2000: n. pag. Print.

We read that and understand the “without Christ” part for ourselves, but reading on, do you see how he draws a line of *separation* between the *Gentile* Ephesians and *Israel*? In their relationship to Israel and the covenants, the Gentile Ephesians were “aliens” and “strangers” and were “far off”. In other words, the Gentiles and Israel were *separated*. Christ accomplished the amazing feat of bringing them together to create something new and unique! That idea leads us to our 2nd word picture:

- **Ephesians 2:14** *For He Himself is our peace, who has made both one, and has broken down the middle wall of separation, 15 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, 16 and that He might reconcile them both to God in one body through the cross, thereby putting to death the enmity. 17 And He came and preached peace to you who were afar off (Gentiles) and to those who were near (Jews). 18 For through Him we both have access by one Spirit to the Father.*

Notice the use of the verbs “made” and “create” ... sound familiar? In this case, what was *created* was “one new man from the two” (Jews and Gentiles). Notice also that the “one new man” is a single thing *made up* of more than one thing, just like we could say about “workmanship”, right? But what did Jesus need to do in order to “make both one”? Paul tells us that Jesus broke down the “middle wall of separation”. What was that wall?

...**the Law** was the *middle wall of partition* that was now broken down according to Ephesians 2:14-15 ... God made four *unconditional eternal covenants* with Israel. All of God's blessings, both material and spiritual, are mediated by means of these four Jewish covenants. God also had a fifth covenant which was temporary and conditional, the Mosaic Covenant that contained the Mosaic Law. The Mosaic Law served as the middle wall of partition to keep Gentiles, as Gentiles, *away from* enjoying Jewish spiritual blessings. If the Mosaic Law were still in effect, it would still be a wall of partition to keep the Gentiles *away*; but this wall of partition was broken down with the death of the Messiah. Since the wall of partition was the Mosaic Law, this meant the Law of Moses was done away with. Gentiles, as Gentiles, on the basis of faith *can* and *do* enjoy Jewish spiritual blessings by becoming fellow partakers of the promise in the Messiah.⁷

With the Law “removed”, the two (both Jews and Gentiles) can enjoy a direct relationship with God as their Father. But this word picture of “one new man” really tells us more! This picture should naturally lead us to its use in other places in the New Testament... One of the consistent word pictures in the New Testament is the picture of the *church* as the Body of Christ. The “one new man” that Paul speaks of here is the same “man” presented as a “body” with a “head” later in Ephesians, as well as in Romans 12, Colossians 2 and 1st Corinthians 12; the church is Jesus’ “body” and He is our “Head”.

This word picture is so rich that it is really worth another study! But for our purposes, let’s just say that the “one new man” which God *put together* using Jews and Gentiles is something *unique* and *unified*. It only functions properly, however, when the parts are sensitive to the input from the Head, Jesus Christ. We are to be His hands and feet in this world as we listen to His Spirit, but we can only effectively look like His Body when

⁷ Arnold Fruchtenbaum, *The Eight Covenants of the Bible*, <https://arielcontent.org/dcs/pdf/mbs021m.pdf>, 26-27. Accessed 12April2023.

we are united and *together!* And while the focus here is on the “one new man” created by bringing together Jews and Gentiles, this word picture is much more fully developed by Paul in places like Romans 12 and 1st Corinthians 12. But thinking about the “one new man”, if you’re in a church and only 50% are listening to the Head, and the rest are not, what does the man (your church) act like? What does he look like? Healthy? Sad? Mad? Tired? Limping? It can be *so much better* when everyone gets in touch with the Head and begins to love and serve each other, functioning like a *body*. They just need to be willing to hear what the Head is telling them...

This 2nd picture in our series of three should help us to better understand Paul’s focus and purpose. But before we see how the series of pictures fits together fully, let’s take a look at the 3rd word picture.

The 3rd Word Picture: A Holy Temple

In the 1st word picture, we saw *something*, “workmanship”, that was *put together* by a Maker/Creator. In the 2nd word picture, we encountered something more complex and organic, “one new man”, who was *created, put together* from two parts. In this 3rd word picture, we will see God *putting something together, something being built together* for which He has already laid the foundation:

- **Ephesians 2:** *19 Now, therefore, you are no longer strangers and foreigners, but fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God, 20 having been built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Jesus Christ Himself being the chief cornerstone, 21 in whom the whole building, being fitted together, grows into a holy temple in the Lord, 22 in whom you also are being built together for a dwelling place of God in the Spirit.*

Here we have a picture not only of a building, but of (1) the parts which are already finished *and* (2) the parts that God continues to build as He puts together His Holy Temple. The *cornerstone* has already been laid (Jesus), which determines the straightness and integrity of the entire structure. The *foundation* has already been laid (the Apostles and Prophets), upon which the rest of the building can be secure and steady. The church, however, continues to be put together by the Master Builder, God Himself. His desire is to build a *dwelling place* where He can receive worship, and that “place” is US, the church! We are the “bricks” that He is placing in that *building* as He desires. The more believers know how they “fit together” while secure on their foundation, the more the building will look like a *holy temple* (made of people, no less!), *God’s dwelling*. Do you know how you “fit” into the *temple* where God is receiving worship?

In these verses, look at how Paul returns to his overt use of “together”. Do you think he might be trying to make a point? Notice that the idea of “togetherness” is mentioned overtly *3 times* in the beginning of chapter 2 and *3 times* at the end of chapter 2; if you’ve followed the studies we’ve done so far, that shouldn’t surprise you!

And in this 3rd of three word pictures, here is what Paul emphasizes 3 times...

Building/Holy Temple/Dwelling Place:	Together!
Citizens <i>together</i>	συμπολιται
Being fitted <i>together</i>	συναρμολογουμενη
Being built <i>together</i>	Συνοικοδομεισθε

Conclusions

In one of only two passages in the Gospels (both are in Matthew) concerning the church, Jesus said:

- **Matthew 18:20** *For where two or three are **gathered together** in My name, I am there in the midst of them.*

The writer of Hebrews exhorted his readers to be together *intentionally*...

- **Hebrews 10:24** *And let us consider one another in order to stir up love and good works, 25 not forsaking the **assembling of ourselves together**, as is the manner of some, but exhorting one another, and so much the more as you see the Day approaching.*

Nowhere in Ephesians 2 do we see an emphasis on the individual believer... If we study chapter 2 from start to finish, we see that Paul's focus is on *the joining together of Jew and Gentile in the Church* as a result of the removal of the Law, the thing that kept them *both* guilty and apart! Christ's death and resurrection brought the Jew and Gentile *together* by faith in *one body* and in *one "building"*, the church, and gave them both direct access to God.

While all three word pictures in Ephesians 2 point to the *unity* of Jew and Gentile in the church, they certainly "show" us *more* than that! These pictures, along with Paul's use of the idea of "together" in verses 5, 6, 19, 21 and 22, point us to the importance of a *mindset* of fellowship and unity within the church:

- God created the church to be *together* and to work *together*. The church is God's unique "workmanship", a creation of God which combines Jew and Gentile *together*. The church was designed by God and it has His unique signature. God has many things that He wants to accomplish *through* the church He *made*...
- God created both Jews and Gentiles to be *together* in a direct relationship with Him, and what made that possible was the removal of the wall which separated them, the Mosaic Law. The Law kept both Jew and Gentile from enjoying the presence of God, and Jesus took it out of the way! Now they *both* can enjoy spiritual blessing and fellowship with Him *together*.
- God created the church to be Christ's Body, which means that we should *look like Him* when we are *together*. Jesus is our "Head," and the "body parts" should function in response to His will and look like He desires when we are *together*. Loving and serving each other as Jesus' hands and feet is a reflection of God's *design*. While going to church has often become a selfish enterprise (consumerism), that simply means that those "parts" are not responding to the Head, leaving the church *limping*. It doesn't have to be that way, if people will only repent and yield to the Holy Spirit!
- God created the church to be His *dwelling place*. When we are together, as the "building" of God we should recognize the "foundation on which we stand", stand sure in our relationship to the Most Important Cornerstone, and worship the One who continues to inhabit and work on His holy temple (us!).

When we meet with other believers, do we see God's design written all over "us"? Do we want to see Jesus in others to better see what He looks like? Do we worship as a *house* of the Lord and feel His presence at work in our hearts? My prayer is that these three word pictures will help us better "see" the church as God sees it, a *unique work* and blessing that He *made*. May we live with a mindset that we should respond to the Head and be *together* as parts of One Body, God's *workmanship*.