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God's New Society - Part 1

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The Bible for Today with John Stott - Premier

John Stott explains why we can feel a sense of meaninglessness and lostness in the world

Transcript

[Music] This sense of alienation is a sense of powerlessness, a sense of frustration. And it makes many people today either embedded revolutionaries or dropouts who are seeking an alternative society.

[Music] Welcome to The Bible for Today with John Stot.

As the most respected clergyman in the world, according to Billy Graham, and one of the 100 most influential people in the world, according to Time Magazine, there's perhaps been no one who has raised the standard of biblical teaching in the 20th century as John Stot. An extremely humble man known affectionately to many as Uncle John, he was a pastor to pastors and a servant of the global church. From his home church of all souls, Langen Place in Central London, he preached over 600 sermons.

And during this his centenary, we're bringing you some of his very best teaching from nearly 60 years of ministry.

[Music] Isolation can have a very serious effect on us as humans. We feel the need to belong in society and to belong to one another.

But as John Stot will show us today, we only fully enjoy our relationship with one another when we are in a right relationship with God. You'll find it helpful to have Ephesians chapter 2 open in front of you. We continue our studies in the letter of Paul the Apostle to the Ephesians and come tonight to, I think, our fifth instalment.

And if you take your Bible in front of you, you'll find the text Ephesians chapter 2 and verses 11 to 22. Chapter 2 and verses 11 to 22. And I will read again only the opening verses of the passage, Ephesians 2 verse 11.

Therefore remember that at one time you Gentiles in the flesh, called the uncircumcision by what is called the circumcision, which is made in the flesh by hands, remember that you were at that time separated from Christ, alienated from the commonwealth of Israel, strange as to 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, for He is our peace. And so on.

Keep the Bible open, please. Let me introduce our study like this. A very fashionable word in contemporary secular society today is the word alienation.

There are very many people, especially young people, who are disillusioned with what they call the system, with the technocracy, with life itself, and describe themselves as one to the better word as alienated. It was Karl Marx who popularized the word, having himself taken it from the German theologian Ludwig Feuerbach. To Marx, the real plight of the proletariat was its economic alienation.

If a worker puts his craftsmanship into his work, he's putting part of himself into his work. If the employer then more or less robs him of his product and sells it, then Marx said the employer is alienating the craftsman from himself, alienating a part of himself from himself. And this, according to Marx, was the basis of the class struggle between the proletariat and the bourgeoisie.

Nowadays, the word alienation is used rather more generally than that of the working man's alienation, not so much from his own achievement and its due reward as in the exercise of economic and political power. I suppose all of us know the name of Jimmy Reed, who has been and still is one of the leaders, maybe the chief spokesman of the upper-clide shipyard workers. He's a communist consular in Glasgow, and in 1972 he was elected and appointed rector of Glasgow University.

And the subject on which he addressed the students in his inaugural address was alienation. And this is what he said. Alienation is the cry of men who feel themselves to be the victims of blind economic forces beyond their control.

It is the frustration of ordinary people excluded from the processes of decision-making. So you see, this sense of alienation is a sense of powerlessness, a sense of frustration. And it makes many people today either embedded revolutionaries or dropouts who are seeking an alternative society.

Well, long before Karl Marx or Jimmy Reed had ever been thought of, the Bible talked about alienation. And the Bible speaks about other and even worse alienations than the economic and the political. Namely, alienation from God, our Creator, and alienation from one another are fellow creatures.

So that when we are alienated like that, we feel ourselves to be strangers in a world in

which we ought to feel at home. Now, the passage that is our text tonight is all about alienation, or rather it's all about reconciliation, which is the opposite of alienation. And in the second chapter of the letter to the Ephesians, both the first and the second parts of the chapter, there is an allusion to both these alienations.

And indeed the word is used in the New Testament of both alienation from God and alienation from one another. Thus the first half of this chapter, verses 1 to 10, that we looked at a couple of weeks ago, in that men are portrayed as alienated from God. Dead, through their trespasses and sins which they have committed, and as Paul goes on to say later in the same letter, actually in chapter 4, he uses the phrase alienated from the life of God.

They're dead, you see. Spiritually dead, cut off, sundered, alienated from God, who is that true home. That's verses 1 to 10 of this chapter.

But in the second part of the chapter that we consider tonight, men are portrayed not only as alienated from God, although that comes in as well, but also as alienated from each other. And in particular the Gentiles are called at the beginning of my text, if you look at verse 12, in the middle of the verse, alienated from the commonwealth of Israel. It's almost impossible for us to think ourselves back to those days before Christ nearly 2000 years ago and more when humanity was deeply, deeply, deeply divided between the Jews and the Gentiles.

Of course, in a sense, God had caused the division. God had chosen Israel to be His holy or distinct people. But in calling Abraham, he promised that through Abraham's posterity and due course, he would bless all the nations and all the families of the earth.

He chose one nation in order to bless them all. And again, in choosing Israel, he had intended in due course that Israel would become a light to lighten the nations. Israel was a holy nation, a distinct nation, the people of God that chosen in order to be a light to all the nations, you see.

But Israel forgot this vacation, twisted her privilege into favoritism and heartily despised and detested the heathen Gentiles as dogs. Now of this double Gentile alienation from God and from Israel, the people of God, the so-called "middle wall of partition" in the temple was a standing symbol. Just glance on, if you will, to verse 14 and see that we're told there that Jesus is our peace who has made birth to you and Gentile one and has broken down the dividing wall of hostility, the middle wall of partition.

Do you know what that middle wall of partition was? Well, it was a notable feature of the temple that had been built some years before Christ by Herod the Great. The temple itself, the main buildings of the temple, were constructed on an elevated platform and immediately round the buildings of the temple was the court of the priests. A little bit east of that was the court of Israel and further east of that the court of the women.

So that these two courts were the courts of the laity, the male and female laity who were not priests. Now all these were on the elevated platform in the middle of the temple area. From these central courts one descended five steps to a thick wall and passing through one of the gates in the wall, one stood on a ledge at the top of 14 more steps down to the outer court, the court of the Gentiles.

And this court of the Gentiles of the heathen which surrounded the whole of the temple and the inner courts was cut off from the temple itself by a five foot stone wall which threatened not trespasses will be prosecuted, but trespasses will be executed and will have only themselves to blame for their ensuing death. And this notice in both Greek and Latin was erected on the wall at regular intervals right around it and within the last century two of these actual notices have been discovered by archaeologists, one in 1871, the other in 1935. And they read no foreign amé enter within the barrier and enclosure around the temple and anyone who is caught doing so will have himself to blame for his ensuing death.

That was the middle wall of partition and it stood for this division of humanity between the Jews and the Gentiles. This is perhaps not a long introduction but it is the background of the second part of Ephesians chapter two that we're studying tonight. Because although all men are alienated from God because of sin and of that alienation the temple veil, the curtain in the temple with the symbol, the Gentiles additionally were alienated from the people of God, Israel.

And of that alienation the temple wall was the symbol. Now the grand theme of the passage before us tonight is the Jesus Christ as destroyed the wall. He's broken down the enmity, not only between man and God, but between Jew and Gentile, between man and man.

As a result, alienation has given place to reconciliation and enmity has been replaced by peace. Wonderful. If only you could see it in the church today.

But that's another matter, we'll come to that later. Now it may be helpful at this point if we try to grasp the structure of the paragraph that is open before us. In verses 11 and 12 Paul says, "Now remember, remember, remember.

Remember what you were, you Gentiles. At one time you were separated from Christ, strangers, aliens, etc. Remember what you were.

Verse 13, "But now in Christ Jesus everything is different. You were far off. You've been brought near." Verse 14, "Because Jesus Christ is our peace." He's made birth to and Gentile one.

He's abolished the law of commandments. He's created a new humanity, a new society. He's reconciled it to God.

Verse 19, "So then this is the conclusion. You are no longer the strangers you once were. You are something different, something new, something wonderfully new.

You're part of the kingdom of God, part of the family of God, part of the dwelling place of God." It's marvelous. Because if we had time we could be here till midnight studying the simply wonderful passage of Holy Scripture. But I guess I'd be preaching to an empty church.

Well let's sum it up. And there are three parts to this great paragraph. Verse 11 and 12 are the portraits of alienated humanity, what we once were.

Verse 13 to 18 are the portraits of the reconciling Christ, what Jesus the peacemaker has done. And verse 19 to 22 are the portrait of God's new society, his new humanity, what we now are as a result in the community of Jesus. Firstly then alienated humanity, what we once were.

I won't wear you with the details of verse 11, which speaks of the Gentile world in terms of the uncircumcision, a rather derogatory title that the Jews, the circumcised people, circumcision being the token of their membership of the covenant people of God. But Paul goes on to list in verse 12, five disabilities that they had. They were separated from Christ.

Now that's a merry moving phrase if you've been heard in the last weeks of studying chapter 1. The herd of chapter 1 is what it means to be in Christ. In Christ we have this, in Christ we have that, in Christ we have the author. Two weeks ago at the beginning of chapter 2 we saw that God has raised us with Christ, exalted us with Christ, seated us with Christ.

The herd of the beginning of the chapter is being in Christ and with Christ. Yes, but Paul says remember, there was a time when you Gentiles were separated from Christ. You were neither in him nor with him.

You were without him, outside him, separated from him. And you were alienated from a commonwealth of Israel, strangers to the covenants of the promise. You were not members of the chosen people of God.

You were excluded from that privilege. You were foreigners and you were far off and you were without hope. And although God had made promises that one day you'd be included, you were ignorant of that hope.

You were hopeless and you were godless. Oh yes, you worship gods of a sort, but they weren't the true God. You had some knowledge of God from creation, but you didn't know God is Israel, new God.

The father of Israel who revealed himself to Israel, you were without God. It's a terrible

five-fold deprivation. In those days the Gentiles were cut off from Christ from Israel, from the covenants, from hope and from God.

William Hendrickson in his commentary on the Ephesians sums it up that they were Christless, stateless, friendless, hopeless, godless. Or in a single expression of Paul, you were far off, far away, alienated from God and from the people of God. Now friends, that's what you and I were like.

Before Jesus Christ found us, we too were alienated from God and from the people of God, and we were at enmity with God, rebelling against his authority in our lives, and we knew little or nothing of true humanity, true community of love. Men still build walls of partition and division, not round the temple, but I was in East Berlin not long ago. And talking to Christians in East Berlin, I felt the indignity with which they looked at the wall that separates them from their compatriots in the other part of Germany and of Berlin.

We still erect invisible curtains of iron or of bamboo. We still construct our barriers of race and color, of nation and tribe, of cast and class. And the apostle says, "Remember, remember." You're a Christian now, remember what you were before.

Of course, there are some things we need to forget. But here is something we need to remember. What we were before God's grace reached us, alienated from God and from the people of God, the alienated humanity.

That's where it's just 11 and 12. Now the second part of our text is the reconciling Christ, Christ the peacemaker. What Christ has done for us, verses 13 to 18.

In Greek, the emphasis is on the pronoun you, verse 11. Remember that once you were alienated, verse 13, but now Christ Jesus, you, who were far off, have been met near. Isn't it wonderful that contrast between being far away and being brought near? Alienated, reconciled, at a distance from God and the people of God, now very close, in intimacy or fellowship with God and with His people.

Now this special language of being far and near was not uncommon in the Old Testament. God and Israel were known to be near to one another. God had said to Israel, "I will be your God.

You shall be my people. I will dwell among you." Moses could send you to the enemy. What great nation is there that has a God so near to it as the Lord our God is near to us? You see there was a nearness between God and Israel in those days, whereas the Gentiles were regarded as far off, but now in Christ Jesus, even as you are far off, have been met near.

How has it happened? Well, Paul elaborates the work of Christ in these verses, and I fear that in the shortage of time we can't look at all the details. As a matter of fact, in verses 14 to 16, there are seven manverbs about what Christ has done, but in my own

meditation for some weeks on this passage, and maybe I hope for your own thought, you will find it helpful to pick out of their seven manverbs. The three principle ones.

Verse 14, sorry, it's the beginning of verse 15, is the word abolish. Christ has abolished something called the law of commandments and ordinances. Next, he has created something.

He's abolished something in order to create something else. And verse 16 in order that he might reconcile or ask both unto God. I want to suggest that the three verbs to abolish, to create and to reconcile are the key verbs of this paragraph, and will help us to understand what Christ has done.

He's abolished the law of commandments in order to create a single new humanity with the old division between Jew and Gentile done, finished, and he has reconciled this new humanity to God. An abolition of creation and the reconciliation. That's what the peacemaker Christ has done.

You've been listening to the first part of a message by John Stott on Ephesians chapter 2, which will continue at the same time next week. This was one of a series of thirteen sermons that John gave on the letter of the Ephesians, and you can listen to the rest by visiting our website. John wrote over fifty books in his lifetime, eight of which form part of the highly acclaimed The Bible Speaks Today commentary series, including one on the book of Ephesians.

Details of this commentary and all his books can be found at premier.org.uk/JohnStott. The legacy of John Stott lives on and is growing, touching every level of society across the world. Today Christian leaders throughout the majority world are being equipped to provide pastor training and resources in their own countries thanks to the vision of John Stott, who donated all his book royalties to support this ministry through Langham Partnership. To find out about this and other ministries, John Stott founded, go to premier.org.uk/JohnStott. Join us at the same time next week for more from The Bible for Today with John Stott.

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(dramatic music)