

## **The Club**

Ephesians 3:1-6

Imagine a club. It is incredibly strict. You almost cannot join it unless you are born into it. It has rules—extensive, exhaustive rules. What you can and cannot eat. What you can and cannot do. Whom you can and cannot date, let alone marry. What modifications you must, and must *not*, create for your body. In New Testament times, and to a certain extent, today, this is Judaism. The Apostle Paul was a Jew. Moreover, he was a Pharisee, a highly trained, highly educated Jew. A man who would fit right in with this highly educated congregation. He could and did expound on the teachings of his religious tribe. He had very particular opinions on the politics of his world. Yet he maintained that God had given him a new and revolutionary understanding of what scholars now call “salvation history”. How do people become saved? In Jewish thought, one became saved by getting born into the people of God, into the Chosen People, into the Jewish people. But Paul understood that people become saved when they believe in Jesus as the Son of God, the Messiah. No matter what their ethnicity.

This latter part of Paul's thought matters to us today, not the former. Few of us worry about our Jewish identity; though we must concern ourselves with Middle Eastern politics when Palestinians conduct sneak attacks on Jews and Jews respond with disproportionate force. No, we must concern ourselves with Paul, the Jewish

Pharisee's, central insight: in Christ there is no east or west, in him no south or north. In Jesus of Nazareth, a Jew, a rabbi, God has opened salvation too *all* who believe on him, no matter our race, our skin color. I am sixty-four years old. For my entire lifetime the fastest-growing place for Christianity on the Earth has been Africa. For a couple of our seminary years we lived in a great, big old house that had been divided into three apartments. African Christians attending Princeton and their families occupied the other two. One couple came from Malawi, in southeastern Africa. The family downstairs came from Nigeria, and it occurs to me, David Nwalado, although your native country of Nigeria is the most populous on the continent, your folks might possibly know them as fellow Christians. If only I could remember their names!

In fact, American Christians are more distant, ethnically, temporally and in numerous other ways, from the Ephesians to whom Paul wrote. As far as scholars can determine, most of the early Christians in the Ephesian churches were Turks. They had previously worshiped Mithras the Bull, or had a cynical half-faith in the Greek "gods" Hades and Persphone and others (Hadestown reference for you Broadway geeks). In truth, the more things change, the more they stay the same. Most people then and now do not really believe in any god at all. We ask ourselves why church attendance has declined. The answer is that many people have *a/ways* not believed in God, but only in recent decades has it become acceptable to say so out loud, with our choices about how to spend Sunday mornings. And as we have the freedom to make so many choices, many of us have chosen to attend youth sports, or to sleep in, or to do nothing much at all on Sunday mornings, the only time span we

have chosen to keep open.

Yet Paul writes that we have “become fellow heirs, members of the same body, and sharers in the promise in Christ Jesus through the Gospel.” This inheritance language has deep resonance in Jewish thought. In that tradition the heir was and is the eldest son, through whom all blessings on this earth pass. My home church, 1<sup>st</sup> Presbyterian of Bloomington, sponsored a family of Vietnamese boat people in 1975. In 1981, the summer Linda and I got married, we decided to be honest with all prospective employers. In interviews we told them we were getting married June 20<sup>th</sup> and that we’d take a honeymoon, then we would be moving 800 miles away in mid-August so I could attend seminary. Predictably, nobody hired us. So I expanded an already existing yard-care and landscaping business that I handed off to my brother. I had one employee, Namh Namh, a fifteen year-old boy from that Vietnamese family. He worked so hard it shamed me into working harder than I wanted. He was *motivated*. He had known starvation and hopelessness, two things I have to this day never encountered. Namh is the oldest son of an oldest son. His family now operates an empire of upholstery and cleaning shops throughout south-central Indiana. I called him yesterday; they now have sixteen shops. Namh's deepest satisfaction is that he will bequeath this business to his daughter and her husband, an Irish-American named Liam. They have three kids, one of whom is CEO of the family business.

The Apostle Paul would have taken great satisfaction from this story. As a Jew, he understood the importance of families and generations. He understood the value

of hard work. He understood the rewards of passing along an inheritance. And he particularly grasped the critical nature of *spiritual* fulfillment. He wrote the letter we call Ephesians from house arrest in Rome. According to the Book of Acts he had nearly finished his life. He had spent years and years traveling and preaching and doing the often-thankless work of planting and nurturing congregations. Yet his zeal for the salvation of new Christians had not flagged. He still *lived* to see more and more people come to Jesus.

Can we relate? Do we care? Ephesians 3 presents us with a challenge. On what basis do we want to base our lives? Do we live to make money? Do we live to find love? Nothing wrong with either goal, but the true fulfillment of them lies not in the surface pursuit of a bank balance or an impressive Facebook profile picture. The true fulfillment lies in the permanent achievement of the spiritual life. Near the end of his life William Randolph Hearst, one of the most successful, rich men of the early twentieth century, said he wished he had aimed at “something else”. Though he had accomplished an empire and a mansion—the movie Citizen Kane, is based on his life story—he died a sad, lonely man. Just a few days before he died he decided to alter his will. He decided to give a significant amount of money to the Presbyterian Church in Carpenteria, California, near his home. My friend Rich served that church for ten years starting in 1992. He died as well, from brain cancer, in 2002. Before he went, his wife Jill sent out a message: do not wait to give everything you have to give. Because God has given everything God has to give. Exactly so. Jill and Rich got it. Do we?