

True or False? ***Dividing from people I disagree with is good. It is safer for me (and my family).***

What do you think? How do you respond to people you disagree with?

Think about politics. Say you discover an acquaintance or friend of yours supports a political party that you would never support. Or you find out they like a politician that you can't stand. How do you feel about your friend now?

Think about Vaccines, Masks and lockdowns. You discovered people who held opposite views to you on one or all those issues. How did you relate to them? Did you even talk about it? Or might we have cut off or blocked those with different views?

Think about the Bible, Theology, Church and Christianity. You find out that person you met last month holds a different view than you about Creation; Women in leadership; End Times; Worship Preferences or some program that the church runs. Or maybe you find out a person dislikes a preacher or author that you really like. Or you hear that them quote someone you dislike. How do you respond to this disagreement?

Think about parenting or education. You find out those people parent in a very different way than you. Or they educate their children in some way that you don't. So how do you navigate that?

Let's go back to our statement. *Dividing from people I disagree with is good.* Is it okay to divide from others we disagree with? Sometimes. In the case of fundamental faith difference, we are cautioned against joining intimately together with those who hold different beliefs. 2 Corinthians 6:14 – “Do not be yoked together with unbelievers. For what fellowship does light have with darkness?” To be yoked together means to be in a situation where an unbeliever's world view and conduct strongly influences or controls those close to them. So, we sometimes must step back from situations where we're tempted to compromise our love for or trust of Christ. We do gather around a common set of beliefs. This may lead to some natural separation from those who don't share those beliefs.

So it's okay for some division or separation when it comes to deep faith convictions. It's also necessary to step back from others in a toxic or abusive relationship. Some of you have come out of such situations. You've had to set some boundaries.

But it's not okay to separate from a brother or sister in Christ or someone over a vaccine disagreement or politics or views on creation or end times or different approaches to parenting or education. These are secondary issues to the primary reasons we come together. But it seems to me that much of the division in the world has found its way into the church over the past two years.

What about the second half of our opening statement? "It is safer for me (and my family). Dividing from people I disagree with is good. It is safer for me (and my family). Is it safer for us? Certainly, if it really is toxic or abusive situations. But if our natural response to any disagreement is to divide, block and separate for safety reasons, we might unintentionally expose ourselves to some different dangers.

Think about families or communities that live mostly separate lives from others. They have no one else speaking into their lives. That can create an environment where the louder personalities begin to dominate the others. Any disagreement or questions are squashed, dismissed or punished. Christians, churches and para church organizations can go way off track because they have no accountability; no one bringing in alternative viewpoints; no one challenging the dominating person.

Separating ourselves from other believers also goes against God's design for us. He created us to need relationship with Him and with one another. Remember what He said about Adam? "It is not good for man to be alone!" We need one another to grow. In fact, through interaction with the whole community of believers God changes us for our good." So a belief that dividing from others is safer might actually lead to more danger and vulnerability to deceit by the enemy.

Human division seems like such a massive issue that is beyond humanity's ability to solve. Today, we are going to see an incredible promise from the Lord about His peacemaking work. Then we will see how He fulfills this promise. Finally, we will look at how we can connect with God's peacemaking work in our lives, church and community. I pray today will bring renewed hope that we can engage in healthy loving relationships even with those we disagree with.

So please find Ezekiel 37 again in your Bibles. We're looking at the passage following the dry bones section we looked at last week. It's page 617 in the pew Bibles. We're starting at verse 15 which is near the bottom right column. So let's read Ezekiel 37:15-28.

Ezekiel 37:15-28 (ESV)

¹⁵ The word of the LORD came to me: ¹⁶ “Son of man, take a stick^[a] and write on it, ‘For Judah, and the people of Israel associated with him’; then take another stick and write on it, ‘For Joseph (the stick of Ephraim) and all the house of Israel associated with him.’ ¹⁷ And join them one to another into one stick, that they may become one in your hand. ¹⁸ And when your people say to you, ‘Will you not tell us what you mean by these?’ ¹⁹ say to them, Thus says the Lord GOD: Behold, I am about to take the stick of Joseph (that is in the hand of Ephraim) and the tribes of Israel associated with him. And I will join with it the stick of Judah, and make them one stick, that they may be one in my hand. ²⁰ When the sticks on which you write are in your hand before their eyes, ²¹ then say to them, Thus says the Lord GOD: Behold, I will take the people of Israel from the nations among which they have gone, and will gather them from all around, and bring them to their own land. ²² And I will make them one nation in the land, on the mountains of Israel. And one king shall be king over them all, and they shall be no longer two nations, and no longer divided into two kingdoms. ²³ They shall not defile themselves anymore with their idols and their detestable things, or with any of their transgressions. But I will save them from all the backslidings in which they have sinned, and will cleanse them; and they shall be my people, and I will be their God.

²⁴ “My servant David shall be king over them, and they shall all have one shepherd. They shall walk in my rules and be careful to obey my statutes. ²⁵ They shall dwell in the land that I gave to my servant Jacob, where your fathers lived. They and their children and their children's children shall dwell there forever, and David my servant shall be their prince forever. ²⁶ I will make a covenant of peace with them. It shall be an everlasting covenant with them. And I will set them in their land and multiply them, and will set my sanctuary in their midst forevermore. ²⁷ My dwelling place shall be with them, and I will be their God, and they shall be my people. ²⁸ Then the nations will know that I am the LORD who sanctifies Israel, when my sanctuary is in their midst forevermore.”

The word of the Lord comes to Ezekiel again. The Lord instructs him to perform another sign act. Ezekiel must gather up two sticks. On one, he writes “For Judah and the people of Israel associated with him.” On the other, he writes, “For Joseph (the stick of Ephraim) and the people associated with him.” Then he must take the two sticks and hold the ends together in one hand. This would make it look like the 2 sticks were one stick. Then people would see the unified stick with writing on each end. They would ask Ezekiel what it all meant.

The Lord instructs Ezekiel how to explain all this in verse 19. “Say to them, ‘Thus says the Lord God: Behold, I am about to take the stick of Joseph (that is in the hand of Ephraim) and the tribes of

Israel associated with him. And I will join with it the stick of Judah, and make them one stick, that they may be one in my hand.” In performing this sign act, Ezekiel is role playing God. The two sticks are the two kingdoms of Israel. God promises to bring them back together.

But we don’t understand the magnitude of this claim. So let’s think about divided nations in our world today. Think about Korea. It separated into two nations around 1945. Then the Korean war happened in the 1950’s. They have never signed a peace treaty. They are technically still at war today with hundreds of thousands of soldiers on both sides ready in case the ceasefire breaks. Think about the hostility and differences between North and South Korea that have built up over 80 years. Then imagine God coming along and saying “I will make these two nations one.” Or think about the two Irelands – Northern Ireland the Republic of Ireland. They’ve been separate about 100 years. Think about the hostility and troubles there have been between those nations. Then imagine God saying, I will make the two nations one nation again. How will that work in light of all the grievances, bitterness, and wounds?

The Israelites started out as a united nation in about the year 1050 before Christ. The 12 tribes of the Israelites formed this kingdom. They remained together during the reigns of Saul, David and Solomon. But then Solomon’s son tried to rule with an iron fist. The ten northern tribes rejected his rule. They separated from the 2 southern tribes. The tribe of Ephraim dominated the northern kingdom. So it was sometimes called Ephraim who was the son of Joseph way back in Genesis. The tribe of Judah dominated the southern kingdom so it got the name Judah. When they separated, there was a bitter civil war. They fought a couple more times over their first two hundred years.

Then in 722, the northern kingdom fell to the Assyrians. They forced many Israelites into captivity in Assyria. The Assyrians also intermarried with the Israelites who stayed. So the northern kingdom ceased to exist. It’s descendants had been scattered for over 140 years prior to Ezekiel’s time.

So at the time of this prophesy, North & South Israel had separated for 400 years. That’s a lot of time for war, hostilities, and grudges. Yet here, the Lord claims He will make the two kingdoms one again. He will somehow reunite divided peoples. Look at verse 22 again. The Lord says “And I will make them one nation in the land, on the mountains of Israel. And one king shall be king over them all,

and they shall be no longer two nations, and no longer be divided into 2 kingdoms.” So God promises the return and restoration not only for the exiles living in Babylon. It applies to Israelites scattered everywhere. It promises a reunification of two formerly hostile and divided peoples.

Notice as well, that this will not simply involve a change in location when people living apart will now live together. It will also involve a renewed spirituality. Verse 23 – They shall not defile themselves anymore with their idols and their detestable things, or with any of their transgressions. But I will save them from all the backslidings in which they have sinned, and will cleanse them; and they shall be my people and I shall be their God.” Not only will there be a physical reunification. The Lord will provide spiritual renewal and changed hearts for the people.

But that’s not all. Verse 24 - “My servant David shall be king over them, and they shall all have one shepherd.” Notice again the emphasis on unification and oneness. “They shall all have one shepherd.” Yet there’s a slight problem. David was dead. He died around 970 BC. So how could David rule them, unless this was a different David?

Then notice again the spiritual and ethical character of the people. Middle of verse 24. “They shall walk in my rules and be careful to obey my statutes.” Verse 25 – “They shall dwell in the land that I gave to my servant Jacob.” He was the father of the 12 sons who became the 12 tribes of Israel. The Lord changed Jacob’s name to Israel. In the middle of verse 25, we get a sense of the nature of this kingdom. “They and their children and their children’s children shall dwell there forever, and David my servant shall be their prince forever.” So this is an eternal kingdom. This “David” person shall be their prince forever.

Then more good news comes in verse 26. “I will make a covenant of peace with them. It shall be an everlasting covenant.” So the Lord talks about entering into this covenant of peace with the people that will last forever. Think about how this covenant talk would sound to exiles living near Babylon. They were forced to live there because they, and their forefathers, broke covenant with the Lord. They worshipped idols and ignored the prophets calling them back to the Lord. But now the Lord promises a covenant of peace that will last forever.

Then look what happens at the end of verse 26 and into verse 27. “And I will set them in their land and multiply them, and will set my sanctuary in their midst forevermore. My dwelling place shall be with them, and I will be their God, and they shall be my people.” Remember Ezekiel’s temple vision back in chapters 8 to 10? A messenger brought Ezekiel to see people practice of idolatry throughout the temple complex. Then the Lord’s chariot throne ascends and departs from the temple to the mountains on the east side of the city. We also know that Jerusalem’s temple was destroyed when the Babylonians captured Jerusalem.

Yet now the Lord promises His sanctuary in their midst forever. Yet it sounds like something different than a temple. It seems like the Lord will be with His people in some tangible way without the hiddenness and boundaries of a temple building. The vision then concludes with the declaration that the nations will know that the Lord sanctifies Israel. His sanctuary will be in their midst forevermore.

Now this is an incredible vision with an even more incredible promise. Somehow, the Lord will bring together two peoples divided by four hundred years of hostility scattered to multiple nations with no human king to rally them. The Lord will not only bring them together physically. He will change them spiritually so that they will desire to walk according to His ways. He will appoint a David figure to rule them forever. He makes an everlasting covenant of peace with them. He will dwell with them.

This is something the people cannot do. God is the only one who can do this. God can bring such a divided people together by His power. It’s what God does and has been doing throughout history. He does the impossible. He formed a nation out of a little-known enslaved people called the Hebrews in Egypt. He has just given the vision of dry bones coming to life by His power and Spirit. Now he promises a unified people from all parts of the world with renewed hearts. I would summarize our Ezekiel 37 passage like this. **The Lord brings divided people together under His Son’s rule into a covenant of everlasting peace.**

So what happened? Well some Jews did return to rebuild the temple and rebuild the walls. Almost 600 years after Ezekiel’s time, God sent His Son, Jesus Christ. He came from the line of David.

Then listen to a reflection on Jesus' coming by a guy named Paul. This comes from the New Testament letter of Ephesians. We will read Ephesians 2:11-22. Page 829 in the pew Bibles. This letter was written to Israelites and Gentiles – non-Israelites.

Ephesians 2:11-22 (ESV)

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— ¹² remember that you were at that time separated from Christ, alienated from the commonwealth of Israel and strangers to 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. ¹⁴ For he himself is our peace, who has made us both one and has broken down in his flesh the dividing wall of hostility ¹⁵ by abolishing the law of commandments expressed in ordinances, that he might create in himself one new man in place of the two, so making peace, ¹⁶ and might reconcile us both to God in one body through the cross, thereby killing the hostility. ¹⁷ And he came and preached peace to you who were far off and peace to those who were near. ¹⁸ For through him we both have access in one Spirit to the Father. ¹⁹ So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God, ²⁰ built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus himself being the cornerstone, ²¹ in whom the whole structure, being joined together, grows into a holy temple in the Lord. ²² In him you also are being built together into a dwelling place for God by ²³ the Spirit.

Did you hear that? Did you hear how God sent Jesus for you? How Jesus gave His blood for you? So not only did Jesus' life and death purchase the peace between the northern and southern nations of Israel. It purchased peace between Jews and Gentiles. God creates a new people made up of all the tribes on earth and called it the church. You and I are invited to join the church which is the people of God built together into a dwelling place for God.

If the Lord can bring peace between entire nations and people groups by the blood of His Son, He can certainly empower us to live in peace with another under Christ. The key to staying in relationship with fellow Christians we disagree with we must first recognize first our oneness under Christ. Then we depend on Him and His peace-making power to enable us to engage in healthy respectful relationship and disagreement.

So how would we access and live this out?

Receive the original peace God purchased for you through Christ Jesus. Jesus purchased peace between God and us. Ephesians 2:13 – “But now in Christ Jesus, you who once were far off

have been brought near by the blood of Christ.” By our sin and walking away from God, we divided ourselves from Him. Yet through Christ’s blood, that is all paid for. When we receive Christ we are brought near and into God’s family. Receive this by putting your trust onto Christ and turning your life away from living your own way. Instead you live with Him as your King and Shepherd.

Practice resting in the peace of God’s presence and provision.

- Calm your heart and soul before the Lord. (Silence; stillness; space – to remove distractions; to clear your mind).
- Acknowledge the state of your soul before the Lord.
- Ponder the greatness of God who promises and delivers an everlasting covenant of peace.
 - Isaiah 26:3-4 - You keep him in perfect peace whose mind is stayed on you, because he trusts in you. Trust in the Lord forever, for the Lord God is an everlasting rock.
- Keep focused more on the Lord, His power, the peace He brings rather than the situation.
- Let Him speak to you, minister to you, calm you.
- Return to life with renewed perspective.

Repent of any peace-breaking that you’ve been part of and reconcile. Romans 14:19 – So then let us pursue what makes for peace and for mutual upbuilding.

Live Peaceably with all. Romans 12:18 - If possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all. Romans 14:19 - ¹⁹So then let us pursue what makes for peace and for mutual upbuilding. 2 Corinthians 13:11 ¹¹Finally, brothers, rejoice. Aim for restoration, comfort one another, agree with one another, live in peace; and the God of love and peace will be with you.

So we started today by pondering the statement ***Dividing from people I disagree with is good. It is safer for me (and my family).*** Let’s consider a different statement to guide us going forward. ***Discovering disagreement with others can be hard. But by the power of Christ the peacemaker, it is possible to remain respectful and loving as we go forward.***