

Meant for More Than Just Us (Eph. 4:6)

Chris Altmann – February 7, 2010

While traveling recently to the Philippines, I was reminded of the human tendency to create boundaries.

- For example, at the Memphis International Airport there is a clear boundary regarding where you can and cannot park. You *can* park in long-term lots and short-term lots. But you *cannot* park in the drop-off zone near the entrance to the airport. Security guards at the drop-off zone ensure that you can barely get out of the car before they whistle for your loved one to move the vehicle. You can park *there* (short-term and long-term lots), but you cannot park *here* (drop-off zone). Thus, the morning of our trip, we bid a quick farewell to Beverly Ralston who deposited David and me at the drop off zone at the airport.
- While in Bangkok, we visited the royal palace of Thailand's kings. We even got to view the royal throne. The royal throne had a very large white ornamental umbrella above it. The king's umbrella had 9 tiers or levels. The queen's had 7. The umbrellas of princes and princesses had 5. But common people could not even own an umbrella with more than 3 tiers. And obviously, only one person could sit on that throne under that 9-tiered umbrella—the king. If you were a commoner, you could sit *there* (among the crowds under their 3 tiered umbrellas) but you could not sit *here* (on the throne under the 9 tiered umbrella).
- While changing planes in Tokyo, we went through the most intense security I have ever seen. Though all of us had been previously screened in Manila, once we got to Tokyo, we were re-screened. Just to get into the gate area, every one of the 450 passengers had his/her carry-on luggage dumped onto a table and hand-searched, and each of us was subjected to a lengthy body search. If you did not go through that security scrutiny, you could stand out *there* (in the other gates and shops), but you could not stand *here* (at the gate waiting to board). We tend to create a lot of boundaries.

And so did those in the ancient world. One place where boundaries always showed in the ancient world up was in religion. *There were two significant boundaries in ancient religion: the people whom the gods loved, and the places where the gods labored.* Most people believed that God or the gods had boundaries or limits when it came to the people whom they loved and the places where they labored. For example, if you belonged to Group A, God or the gods valued you, loved you, and cared for you. But if you did not belong to Group A, God or the gods did not value you, love you, or care for you. And, if you were in Place B, God or the gods labored among you, ministered among you, performed great deeds among you. But if you were not in Place B, God or the gods did not labor among you, minister among you, or perform great deeds among you.

We find hints of this two-fold boundary in Paul's letter to the Ephesians. In Eph. 1:21, Paul writes of "*rule, authority, power, and dominion.*" This is probably a reference to other gods whom people in Ephesus worshipped. And one thing was generally true about those gods who supposedly had rule, authority, power, and dominion—these gods had boundaries. Most of the gods in the ancient world were attached to specific locations—cities, regions, and nations. If

you were in that specific location, you could probably count on that god working and laboring in that place. But once you left that location, that god's labor ceased. There were limits to divine labor.

And, there were limits to divine love. In chapter 2, Paul writes about the two ethnic groups of his day: Jews and Gentiles. Generally in Paul's day, if you belonged to one group, say, the Gentiles, you could count on a god's love, concern, and care. But if you didn't belong to that group, the gods did not have as much love, care, and concern for you. There were limits to divine love.

At a certain level, these two religious boundaries still exist. *Even modern religion has boundaries concerning the people whom God loves and the places where God labors.* Sometimes I hear statements among religious groups which suggest that Americans are recipients of a special kind of love from God and that America is a place of unique divine activity. That is, if there's anyone God loves, it's Americans. And if there's any place God is working, it's America. I sometimes hear similar statements from people speaking of a particular religious group or denomination. In almost every denomination or religious group, there is a tendency among the fundamentalists of the group to believe that their group or denomination has a special place in God's heart and experiences unique levels of God's labor.

These religious boundaries are summarized in two words: "us" and "here." There is sometimes an implicit belief among modern religious people that above all, God loves "us" and among all, God works "here." Not that we believe God doesn't love "them" at all or that God doesn't work "there" at all. But sometimes we at least act as if God, above all, loves "us" and among all works "here."

All of this prepares us to hear one small but significant verse in chapter 4 of Ephesians. The verse is part of a three verse section in which Paul describes the Trinity. And here's what Paul says about the Father: *one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all.* (Eph. 4:6 ESV).

Some believe that this description of God is Paul's attempt to mirror the theology of the Shema, the great confession of the Jewish faith found in Deut. 6:4: 4 Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one. (Deut. 6:4 TNIV).¹ Just as that was the great Jewish confession, some believe Eph. 4:6 is the great Christian confession: There is one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all. We find a similar confession in 1 Cor. 8: 5 For even if there are so-called gods, whether in heaven or on earth (as indeed there are many "gods" and many "lords"), 6 yet for us there is but one God, the Father, from whom all things came and for whom we live; and there is but one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom all things came and through whom we live (1 Cor. 8:5-6 TNIV). If the 1 Cor. 8 and Eph. 4 statements are reflections of the Shema, then they carry tremendous significance for us. This is intended to be one of the central things we confess in terms of what we believe about God. Above all, we believe that God is the Father of all, that he is over all, through all, and in all.

In general the confession points to four things: First, God is transcendent (he is over all). Second, God is pervasive (he is through all). Third, God is immanent (he is in all).² Fourth, God is creator (he is Father of all). God is the transcendent, pervasive, immanent creator of all. *In other words, this confession means that the Christian God has no boundaries or limits. He is over all—there are no limits to what he is over. He is through all—there are no limits to what is through. He is in all—there are no limits to what he is in. And he is Father of all—there are no limits to his Fatherhood. He has no boundaries, no limits.*

A number of scholars take the "all" references as references only to people in the Church. If so, the "alls" point to the fact that God is the Father of all people in the church (he is Father of all), that he is transcendent above each person in the church (above all), that he works through each person in the church (through all), and that he dwells in each of person in the church (in all).³

But while the "all's" certainly include people in the church, they probably also include everyone else in creation. *Paul is ultimately saying that the Christian God has no boundaries: he is the Creator of all creation (Father of all), he is the Lord above all creation (above all), he is working through all creation (through all), and he is filling all creation (in all).* There are no boundaries to what God has created, what God rules over, where God is working, and where God may be found.

We know the "alls" refer to all creation and not just all in the church because throughout Ephesians Paul has been writing of God's activity in all creation:

- 1:10 - *10 to be put into effect when the times reach their fulfillment—to bring unity to all things in heaven and on earth under Christ,*
- 1:22-23 - *22 And God placed all things under his feet and appointed him to be head over everything for the church, 23 which is his body, the fullness of him who fills everything in every way,*
- 3:9 - *9 and to make plain to everyone the administration of this mystery, which for ages past was kept hidden in God, who created all things*
- 3:14-15 - *14 For this reason I kneel before the Father, 15 from whom every family in heaven and on earth derives its name.*
- and 4:10 - *10 He who descended is the very one who ascended higher than all the heavens, in order to fill the whole universe.⁴ Thus, while this confession in 4:6 may begin as a reference to the Church, it quickly extends far beyond the Church. Paul paints a portrait in which God is the Creator of all creation (God and Father of all), God is Lord of all creation (above all), God is working through all creation (through all), and God is filling all creation (in all).*

For our purposes this morning, I want to draw special attention to the description of God being "of all" and God being "through all." As I've mentioned already, God being "of all" means that he is the creator of each and every thing in heaven and earth. Regarding humanity, it means he is the creator of each and every individual. We in the church thus share something significant with every other human being. Everyone one of us in church and out of church share the same

Creator. We all have the same fingerprints on us. We all have the same "Made in" label on us. And thus, we all have the same value, the same worth, the same significance.

And, as I alluded to a moment ago, God being "through all" means that there is nowhere in this creation where God is not already at work. One scholar writes that *"Through all" means that God's activity "permeates the church and the entire universe."*⁵

Thus, here's what this ultimately means: God's limitless love and labor have no boundaries. When it comes to the people whom God loves and the places where God works, there are no boundaries. Specifically, "us" and "here" are no longer accurate labels for God's love and God's labor. *God's limitless love and labor extend far beyond "us" and "here."* That's what it means for God to be "Father of all" and "through all."

This makes possible a boundary-breaking community. This fact about God suddenly makes it possible for this congregation to be a community for every race, every income, every background, each gender, every age, and all nationalities. Eph. 4:6 and its great confession makes possible the only community on earth that has no boundaries, where every wall of race, age, gender, income, and nationality is erased.

But there is a second area of application regarding God being "of all" and "through all." *God's limitless love and labor extend far beyond "us" and "here."* *This makes possible boundary-breaking ministry.* Because we are a people who believe that God is laboring in places beyond our little group (through all), and because we believe God's in love with others outside our little group (Father of all), that compels us to extend the boundaries of our ministry. Why? Because we want to labor where God is laboring. And we want to love those whom God is loving. Because we confess a God who loves all (is Father of all) and labors among all (is through all), we want to become a people who also love all and labor among all.

Let me get more specific. *Because God's limitless love and labor extend far beyond "us" and "here," I believe God has called us to labor among and love those from Enclave to Exchange.*

- Just east of our new location is a large suburban neighborhood called The Enclave at Sparkle Creek. Within its gated community you'll find some of the largest homes in the Mid-South. We can easily assume that some of the wealthiest in the Mid-South live in the Enclave. Lots are very large, there are horses running in open fields and three and four cars fill the garages. I believe God has called Highland to labor among those in the Enclave and love those in the Enclave—because that's where God's laboring and that's who God's loving. If we confess that God is Father of all and that he is through all, we confess that he is Father of those in the Enclave and he is working in the Enclave.
- But many miles west of our new location is a large urban neighborhood located near Exchange Street downtown. That's where Memphis Urban Ministry is prayerfully striving to establish a new headquarters called the Center for Peace. Earlier last week MUM began due diligence on that facility. It lies within the poorest Zip code in Shelby County. When several of us went to tour that building on Exchange Street, there were homeless people living in it. Cups from convenience stores were filled with human

waste. Old and dirty clothes were lying around. We can easily assume that some of the worst living conditions exist in and around Exchange Street. And I believe God has called Highland to labor among those on Exchange and love those on Exchange— because that’s where God’s laboring and that’s who God’s loving. If we confess that God is Father of all and that he is through all, we confess that he is Father of those on Exchange and that he is working on Exchange.

- And in between the Enclave and Exchange are the neighborhoods of many of you, schools, apartments, condominiums, and thousands and thousands of people. And I believe God has called Highland to labor among them and love them – because that’s where God is laboring and that’s who God is loving.

I believe God is calling Highland to do what few congregations are willing or able to do. I believe God is calling us to embrace both the Enclave and Exchange. How? The handout this morning shows some of the ways we served in the general area of Exchange last year and some of the ways we anticipate serving in the Houston Levee area and Exchange area this year. But as we move to a new location many miles away from downtown Memphis, there will be a great temptation to forget the urban poor and to just focus on “us” and “here.” And, as we move into a new building and once again face the unsettling feeling of a new place, a new schedule, and a new routine, there will be a great temptation to even forget our new neighbors and to focus only on “us” and “here.” Frankly, I’ve already seen this happening as people at Highland have been debating what our worship schedule should or should not be at Houston Levee. Time and time again the debate comes back to concerns about “us” and “here.” But I believe God’s vision is this: Enclave to Exchange. Who is the Highland church going to labor among? Those from Enclave to Exchange. Who is the Highland church going to love and serve and lay down our lives for? Those from Enclave to Exchange. Why? Because that’s what God is already doing. God’s already active in those two areas and every area in between. He is “through all.” And he’s already in love with the people in those two areas and every area in between. He is “of all.” I believe God’s made us for so much more than just “us” and “here.” I believe he’s made us to labor and love everywhere he is.

Let’s close by standing and making this confession together: *We believe in the one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all.*

¹ Andrew T. Lincoln Ephesians Word Bible Commentary (Word, 1990), 240.

² F. F. Bruce The Epistles to the Colossians, to Philemon, and to the Ephesians The New International Commentary on the New Testament (Eerdmans, 1984), 337.

³ Bruce, 338.

⁴ Lincoln, 240.

⁵ Liefeld.