Are you an outsider? It all depends is the best possible answer. The Merriam-Webster online dictionary gives these definitions of “outsider”: “1: a person who does not belong to a particular group; 2 chiefly British : a contender not expected to win.” According to this an outsider is either a person who doesn’t belong or else a loser -- or perhaps both. Our American culture puts a considerable emphasis on “belonging” and sometimes ‘belonging’ in the sense of being an outsider. Our high level emphasis on personal freedom and individualism often makes the rebel the hero since he challenges the group in some way. But in more communal or collective oriented societies being an outsider is one of the worst evils to befall an individual. In such a culture, the group is everything. One has no personal identity apart from a social group such as family, vocation etc. Personal worth comes through the group to the individual. Without the group there is no individual value or worth.

The world of Paul was a very communal focused society. The Greeks defined it in terms of πολιτική (citizenship). The Romans adopted pretty much the Greek model, but being a citizen of Rome (city) was critical. Without it you had no legal rights in the empire, apart from any local customs in place and that the ruling Roman authorities could override at will. Paul’s Jewish world defined value and worth through being a part of the Covenant. God had chosen a people, not individuals, to be His own. You had to belong to the people through the covenant.

For both Jews and Greeks, this communal orientation fostered an intense elitist mentality. Jews divided humanity into two groups: 1) we Jews who belong to God (Ἰουδαίοι), and 2) you Gentiles who are pagans (τὰ ἔθνη). Religious elitism controlled this perspective. The Greeks had their own slicing up of humanity: 1) we intelligent Greeks (οἱ Ἐλληνες), and 2) you ignorant barbarians (οἱ βαρβαροί), as Paul alludes to in Rom. 1:14, based on a feeling of intellectual superiority.

The astounding claim in Eph. 2:11-22 is that these divisions no longer matter. There is no distinction between Jew and Gentile in Christ. Belonging to a group remains essential; that part isn’t diminished in the New Testament. But belonging to Christ is the only group membership that now matters. To get a first century Jew to accept
such teaching was a huge challenge. To get Gentile Christian converts to accept full status in the community of believers was no small matter either. The challenge of Eph. 2:11-22 to its own world is very different from how it can challenge our world. We define insider / outsider with a different set of values typically. The heroic figure in the passage is the insider. No place exists for the outsider rebel. One must belong to Christ on the inside in order to be saved. Christianity in the biblical sense is a group participation experience, and this is the only authentic version of Christianity. And the possibilities for blessing on the inside are limitless. They are far more valuable than “insider” stock broker tips might be.

I. Context

The extensive background material developed in the previous study on Eph. 1:1-14 serves as the foundation for the following sections under the study of the Context of the passage. I will attempt to summarize that material here, and supplement it only where needed for the content of 2:11-22.

a. Historical

**External History.** Ephesians was most likely dictated to a writing secretary sometime during the two plus years of Paul’s imprisonment in the eastern Mediterranean coastal city of Caesarea by the Roman governors Felix and Festus (cf. Acts. 23:26-26:32). This would have been sometime between AD 58 and 60. The actual writer of the original document is unknown, but during this period Paul had numerous very capable individuals helping take care of him during his confinement at the hands of the Romans, including Luke, Silas, and other associates.

The trip from Caesarea to Ephesus via sea was not a lengthy journey for Tychicus, Onesimus, and others to make as they carried this letter, along with the one to the Colossians and the third one to Philemon who lived in Colossae. Ephesians was to be the first letter to be read as a quasi “cover” letter, thus setting a tone for the other letters. Consequently the contents of the letter probe some of the most profound aspects of being a Christian. A tone of celebrating Christian experience also permeates the letter. The importance of being a part of the community, the body of Christ, is highlighted.

**Internal History.** The time and place markers inside 2:11-22 are general and not specific to just the events taking place in Ephesus. The time perspective flows between “then” and “now.” That is, between pre-Christian and Christian conversion experience and the implications of both those periods. Paul utilizes the dominating cultural boundary markers of that day -- citizenship; a people identifiable etc. -- as his way of defining the nature of Christian experience for both Jew and Gentile. Thus, understanding this historical background sociologically is important for grasping the full impact of Paul’s words. Relevant aspects of that history will be introduced in the exegesis of the passage below.
b. Literary

Genre. As a letter, Ephesians follows both the style of ancient letters in general and those in the Pauline collection of letters in the New Testament. The typical elements of Praescriptio (1:1-2); Proem (1:3-23); Body (2:1-6:20); Conclusio (6:21-24) are found.

Our passage stands as a part of the theological focus of the letter Body (cf. below). The literary shape of 2:11-22 is a series of doctrinal affirmations about the new people of God created by God’s grace through the reconciling work of Christ in His death on the cross. These affirmations do not follow any distinctive literary genre, but are typical affirmations that can be found elsewhere in the writings of Paul in the New Testament. The central motif theologically for these verses is the concept of reconciliation (ἀποκαταλάβασις).

In that work Christ has laid the foundation for God to create for Himself one new humanity (cf. v. 16a) out of Jews and Gentiles.

The concept of spiritual reconciliation is expressed in the New Testament mainly through the word group made up of καταλάβασις (I reconcile); ἀποκαταλάβασις (I completely reconcile); and καταλαβή, ἡ (reconciliation). This word group shows up exclusively in the writings of Paul. The use of ἀποκαταλάβασις in Ephesians and Colossians rather than καταλάβασις, which is used elsewhere, suggests that Paul coined the verb, since it doesn’t occur in Greek literature prior to the writings of Paul. The addition of the prefix ἀπο to the root verb stem καταλάβασις serves to heighten emphasis on the verb action and thus is often translated as “reconcile completely.”

Although the terms can, and outside religious usage in the NT does, refer to horizontal reconciliation (person to person), Paul only makes mention of this in one place where he speaks of a husband and wife being reconciled to one another (1 Cor. 7:11). An "English word group: Matt. 5:24 (διαλλάσσομαι); Acts 7:26 (συναλλάσσω); and Acts 12:20 (ἠπούντο εἰρήνην; literally, “they asked for peace”). These words exclusively designate horizontal reconciliation between individuals or groups of individuals.

Elsewhere in Paul the terms refer to humans being reconciled to God. Then the reconciled with God can be reconciled to one another as they cross ethnic, gender etc. boundaries through their common faith commitment to Christ.

In our world of such intense strife and warfare, we as believers need this reminder of God’s intention in Christ.

Literary Context. The literary setting of 2:11-22 can be defined as follows. It is a part of the first division of the letter Body:

**Body of the letter: 2:1-6:22**

The first major segment (2:1-3:21) focuses on the marvelous redemptive work of God through Christ Jesus that has lifted us out of sin and into spiritual union and fellowship with Almighty God. This is brought to a grand climax with another doxology of praise in 3:14-21.

The second major segment (4:1-6:22) focuses on moral exhortation, technically known as paraenesis. The ‘how we should live’ emphasis here flows naturally from the ‘who we are spiritually’ first section in chapters two and three. Christian living has to be based upon spiritual relationship to the Heavenly Father for it to be authentic.

This first segment of the letter Body, 2:1-3:21, can be divided into the following pericopes based on the pericope headings of the UBS 4th rev. ed Greek New Testament:

1. **From Death to Life, 2:1-10**
2. **One in Christ, 2:11-22**
3. **Paul’s Ministry to the Gentiles, 3:1-13**
4. **To Know the Love of Christ, 3:14-21**

A distinctive thought progression is developed in these two chapters and they have a heavy theological focus. Central to this theme is God’s grace; cf. 2:5, 7, 8; 3:2, 7, 8. This is no surprise since God’s grace was an important motif in the Proem of 1:3-23 (cf. 1:6, 7).

The first unit, 2:1-10, underscores the greatest expression of God’s grace in the conversion moment for the believer. Eph. 2:8 captures the essence of...
it: "For by grace you have been saved through faith, and
this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God." The sec-
ond unit, 2:11-22, builds on this to develop the idea
of a brand new people of God emerging from this
magnificent grace of God. This new people is to be
made up of both Jew and Gentiles who have put their
faith in Christ. The third unit, 3:1-13, highlights Paul's
personal calling from God to preach the gospel to
Gentiles as a part of this divine plan of unification.
This section then reaches a grand crescendo with
the doxological praise of God's grace through Christ
in 3:14-21.

II. Message

Literary Structure. The internal flow of ideas in vv. 11-22 is relatively easy to determine. Three sub-
units can be clearly identified: 1) vv. 11-13; 2) vv. 14-18; and 3) vv. 19-22. These three segments are tightly
linked to one another. Verses 14-18 stand as the foundation for the assertions in verses 11-13; and they
also provide the theological implications that are made explicit in verses 19-22. For a detailed analysis of
the Greek text see the Block and Semantic Diagrams, along with the Summary of Rhetorical Structure in
the larger internet version of this study.

The reconciled people of God is the focus of the first and third units. Paul offers two perspectives on
the new people of God in these two units. The reconciling accomplishment of Christ through his shed
blood is the centerpiece of the passage in the second unit. Thus the first is based on the second; the third
grows out of the second.

a. Then & Now, vv. 11-13

Greek NT  
11 Διὸ μνημονεύ-
ετε ὅτι ποτὲ ὑμεῖς τὰ ἔθνη ἐν σαρκί, οἱ λεγό-
μενοι ἄκροβυστία ὑπὸ τῆς λεγομένης περιτομῆς ἐν σαρκί ἐχειροποιή-
tου, 12 ὅτι ἦτε τῷ καιρῷ ἐκείνῳ χωρὶς Χριστοῦ, ἀπηλλοτριωμένοι τῆς
πολιτείας τοῦ Ἰσραὴλ καὶ ἕνοι τῶν διαθήκης τῆς ἐπαγγελίας, ἐλπίδα μὴ ἐχοντες καὶ ἄθεοι ἐν τῷ κόσμῳ. 13 νυνὶ δὲ ἐν Χριστῷ ὦ ἱσθοῦ ὑμεῖς οἳ ποτε ὄντες μακρὰν ἐγενήθητε ἐγώς ἐν τῷ ἀἵματι τοῦ Χριστοῦ.

NASB  
11 Therefore remem-
ber that formerly you, the Gentiles in the flesh, who
are called “Uncircumci-
sion” by the so-called “Circumcision,” which is
performed in the flesh by human hands — 12 re-
member that you were at that time separate from
Christ, excluded from the commonwealth of Israel,
and strangers to the covenants of promise, hav-
ing no hope and without God in the world. 13 But
now in Christ Jesus you who formerly were far off have
been brought near by the blood of Christ.

NRSV  
11 So then, remem-
ber that at one time you
Gentiles by birth, called
“the uncircumcision” by
those who are called “the
circumcision”— physical
circumcision made in the
flesh by human hands—
12 remember that you
were at that time without
Christ, being aliens from
the commonwealth of
Israel, and strangers to
the covenants of prom-
ise, having no hope and
without God in the world.
13 But now in Christ Je-
sus you who once were
far off have been brought
near by the blood of Christ.

NLT  
11 Don't forget that
you Gentiles used to
be outsiders. You were
called “uncircumcised
heathens” by the Jews,
who were proud of
their circumcision, even
though it affected only
their bodies and not their
hearts. 12 In those days
you were living apart
from Christ. You were
excluded from citizen-
ship among the people
of Israel, and you did
not know the covenant
promises God had made
to them. You lived in
this world without God
and without hope. 13 But
now you have been
united with Christ Je-
sus. Once you were far
away from God, but now
you have been brought
near to him through
the blood of Christ.

Notes:
The primary focus of the two Greek sentences in these verses is on a re-
minder of who the Ephesian readers were before Christ (vv. 11-12) and now
who they are in Christ (v. 13).

We have here a continuation of the BC / AD perspective on Christian con-
version that first surfaced in 2:1-10 and provided a major organizing structure
for Paul’s thoughts there. For a detailed discussion of this see, the Bible study
“Before / After” on Eph. 2:1-10 at cranfordville.com. In that discussion Paul lined up the contrast of life
before Christ and life after conversion in the following manner. It is instructive to see the list there and
then to compare it with what he says here.
1 You were dead through the trespasses and sins in which you once lived, following the course of this world, following the ruler of the power of the air, the spirit that is now at work among those who are disobedient. 2 All of us once lived among them in the passions of our flesh, following the desires of flesh and senses, and we were by nature children of wrath, like everyone else.

The Before Christ (BC) era was centered on spiritual death. Paul affirmed we were dead, not will be dead. That meant living according to the dictates of this world, under the control of Satan, and following our fleshly passions. Both non-Christian Jew and Gentile were living a life that made them deserving objects of God's wrath.

The AD (after Christ) era, Paul declares, centers on having been made alive in Christ. This means spiritual resurrection out of the previous spiritual death and being seated in "heavenly places" with Christ. That is, we are alive with God and have access to His presence. All this is a work of God's grace intended for our good works that bring praise of our Heavenly Father.

This declaration in 2:1-10 sets the stage for a continued contrast between the then and now in vv. 11-13, but with a different focus. The spiritual reality is the same, but the images that Paul uses are different.

What was his readers' BC life? He calls upon them to remember what this period was like. This era before Christian conversion is described by two οτι clausal playing off the imperative verb μνημονεύετε. This admonition is couched in a present imperative Greek command form of the verb. The implication of this is to call for a continual awareness of the past, rather than for a one time reminder. Clearly Paul felt that his Ephesian readers should never forget where they had come from spiritually. The past is an important part of appreciating the depths of what God had done for us in Christ when He liberated us from that past.

One side note: there's a difference between remembering and celebrating. I've heard many "testimonies" about conversion -- especially from preachers -- who took delight in depicting their sinful, rebellious non-Christian life before conversion. With a few that I have listened to over these sixty plus years now, I came away with the impression that they had a little sadness in giving up at least some aspects of their sinful past in order to become a Christian. That's not what Paul had in mind in any stretch of the imagination! Only shame and guilt about our life and living before Christ should be present in our recollection of that life. To glory in it sends clear signals of a failure to have genuinely repented of that life in coming to Christ.

Paul's depiction of the BC era in verses 11-12 is twofold and is introduced by a couple of "that" (=οτι) clauses standing as the direct object of the imperative verb to remember.

First: "that at one time you Gentiles by birth, called 'the uncircumcision' by those who are called 'the circumcision' — a physical circumcision made in the flesh by human hands —" (οτι ποτε υμεις τα έθνη έν σαρκι, οι λεγομενοι άκροβυστα υπο της λεγομενης περιτομης έν σαρκι χειροποιητου). He begins with a reminder of their ethnic origin as Gentiles, or non-Jews. See the Jew - Gentile slicing up of all humanity discussion above under Literary Genre. Paul here anticipates that his initial targeted readership in this circular letter for Ephesus and beyond was going to be read to predominantly non-Jewish Christian communities. By birth (lit. in the flesh, έν σαρκι) his readers were τα έθνη (Gentiles). The pejorative nature of this term from a Jewish view was blatant. Alfred Edersheim in his classic writing [The Life and Times of Jesus the Messiah] notes this about Jewish attitudes toward others in the first century world:

And then, as the proud Roman passed on the Sabbath through the streets, Judaism would obtrude itself upon his notice, by the shops that were shut, and by the strange figures that idly moved about in holiday attire. They were strangers in a strange
land, not only without sympathy with what passed around, but with marked contempt and abhorrence of it, while there was that about their whole bearing, which expressed the unspoken feeling, that the time of Rome's fall, and of their own supremacy, was at hand.

To put the general feeling in the words of Tacitus, the Jews kept close together, and were ever most liberal to one another; but they were filled with bitter hatred of all others. They would neither eat nor sleep with strangers; and the first thing which they taught their proselytes was to despise the gods, to renounce their own country, and to rend the bonds which had bound them to parents, children or kindred...

Paul's readers were Gentiles. That was roughly equivalent to being called “white trash” in our world. But Paul reminds them of another label tacked on by the Jews of their day: "uncircumcised" (ἁκροβυστία). Only a very few Semitic cultures in the ancient world practiced circumcision of their males. For the Jewish people circumcision took on profound religious significance based on the linking of God’s covenant with Abraham to being circumcised (cf. Genesis 17:9-14).

Particularly important was Gen. 17:13-14:

13 Both the slave born in your house and the one bought with your money must be circumcised. So shall my covenant be in your flesh an everlasting covenant. 14 Any uncircumcised male who is not circumcised in the flesh of his foreskin shall be cut off from his people; he has broken my covenant.”

But Paul's attitude toward the spiritual significance of circumcision here is very different. He considers it merely as a physical action (ἐν σαρκὶ χειροτονήτου) that has been given false religious significance (ὑπὸ τῆς λεγομένης περιτομῆς).

Earlier in both Romans (4:1-12) and also to some degree in Galatians (3:15-18), he had persuasively argued that God had declared Abraham righteous based on Abraham’s faith commitment (Gen. 15:1-6) decades before He insisted that Abraham be circumcised (Gen. 17:9-14). Thus circumcision as having the power to bring one into the Covenant with God that was the basis of salvation -- as taught by the scribal Jews of Paul’s day -- was completely false and was based on twisted interpretation of the Hebrew Bible. Thus for Gentiles to be called “Uncircumcised” by circumcised Jews was about the modern equivalent of saying “worthless pagans.”

What's the value in being reminded of a day when prejudicial labels defined you as outcasts and worthless? Both ethnically and spiritually! Paul evidently saw here the utterly black canvass that God would use to paint his picture of the Gentile believer in Christ with the most vibrant, brilliant colors imaginable. Against such a dark, foreboding backdrop the grace of God would shine as bright as the noon-day sun.

He also signals in this first segment the shallow, superficial nature of the labels “Gentile” and “uncircumcised.” This was the false Jewish assessment of non-Jews. But it focused on one outward physical characteristic: circumcision. And even that was questionable because of the false religious value to circumcision that the Jews had given to it.

Against such it would be easy to dismiss any religious assessment coming from people connected to the Jews, as were the early Christian leaders who were themselves Jewish. And certainly most of first century Roman society looked with even greater contempt on the Jewish people of that world, than the contempt Jews typically held toward Gentiles.

Second: “that you were at that time without Christ, being aliens from the commonwealth of Israel, and strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world” (ὅτι ἦτε τῷ καιρῷ ἐκείνῳ χωρὶς Χριστοῦ, ἀπηλλοτριωμένοι τῆς πολιτείας τοῦ Ἰσραήλ καὶ ξένοι τῶν διαθήκης τῆς ἐπαγγελίας, ἐλπίδα μὴ ἔχοντες καὶ ἁθεόν ἐν τῷ κόσμῳ).

For Gentiles to dismiss the Jewish assessment of them would be to overlook some authentic spiritual realities that were present in their pre-Christian existence. In the second "that"-clause in verse 12, Paul lists several authentic aspects of his readers pre-Christian life (τῷ καιρῷ ἐκείνῳ).

1. They were “without Christ” (χωρὶς Χριστοῦ). Most importantly these people were cut off from Christ who is the exclusive means to salvation and relationship with God. To be missing relationship with Christ meant the loss of everything spiritually. That’s as true today as it was then. Additionally, this phrase in this context has the further tones that non-Jews in their pre-Christian state were without a Messiah. They possessed no anticipation of a divinely commissioned Deliverer who would rescue them from their spiritual death.

2. They were “aliens from the commonwealth of Israel” (απηλλοτριωμένοι τῆς πολιτείας τοῦ Ἰσραήλ). This very Jewish oriented phrase underscores the legitimate role of Covenant Jews in that time. The
Israelite people were God’s chosen people. To be a part of that covenantal people was to be under God’s blessings. Jews did enjoy certain advantages before God as Paul had earlier written about to the Romans (cf. Rom. 9:4-5):

4 They are Israelites, and to them belong the adoption, the glory, the covenants, the giving of the law, the worship, and the promises; 5 to them belong the patriarchs, and from them, according to the flesh, comes the Messiah, who is over all, God blessed forever. Amen.

The Jewish people enjoyed a wonderful religious heritage. And that was something Paul’s Gentile readers didn’t possess. And because of that they suffered serious deficiencies in their religious life. Jesus had alluded to this in his conversation with the Samaritan woman in John 4:22, “You worship what you do not know; we [Jews] worship what we know, for salvation is from the Jews.”

3. They were “strangers to the covenants of promise” (ξένοι τῶν διαθηκῶν τῆς ἐπαγγελίας). Most centrally in not being Jews, Paul’s Gentile readers were not a part of the covenants of promise. In God’s eternal plan of salvation (as its called in German die Heilsgechichte), His blessings flow to humanity through covenants beginning with the one made with Abraham. That covenant was renewed several times during Abraham’s life and became the foundation for understanding the concept of eternal salvation. Paul’s Gentile readers in their pre-Christian existence were not participants in that blessing. Instead, they were “aliens” (ξένοι), non-citizens who possessed no right of participation.

4. They had no hope (ἐλπίδα μη ἔχοντες). These Gentile readers also did not possess hope in their pre-Christian life. What is meant here is that they did not possess any authentic spiritual hope for eternity. Christian hope is the expectation of eternal life lived in the full blessing of God and experienced unceasingly through the ages of eternity. In other words, it is Heaven. The Greek word for hope, ἐλπίς, possesses a level of expectancy of realization that its English counterpart often does not contain. To possess such anticipation with absolute certainty is to have one’s life defined and guided by a marvelous objective. This is the essence of Christian hope as set forth in the New Testament: we know that we’re Heaven bound and each day of life brings us a day closer to arriving at home. That brings excitement and anticipation in growing levels the closer to arrival we get.

5. They were “without God in the world” (ἀθεοὶ ἐν τῷ κόσμῳ). Paul began by declaring that his Gentile readers didn’t possess Christ in the pre-Christian existence. He concludes by declaring that they didn’t possess God either. They were ἀθεοί (atheoi), atheists. Not that they didn’t believe in the existence of deities, for they accepted the existence of hundreds of gods and goddesses. The world of the first century was an overwhelmingly religiously focused culture -- far, far more than our American culture. They had many gods and goddesses, but they didn’t have God -- the only one who actually exists. Paul provides a new take on the idea of an atheist. He / she can be one who believes in the existence of deity, but does not have authentic relationship with the true God who alone exists. The issue is not our mental attitude about the existence of God; rather, it’s about our genuine relationship with that God.

Thus to the BC column begun in 2:1-4, Paul adds several more traits beyond being in spiritual death with all its implications.

In verse 13, he shifts to the AD column with a powerful declaration: “But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ” (ινδὲ ἐν Χριστῷ Ἰησοῦ ὑμῖν ὅτε ἡμέρας μακρὰν ἐγενήθη τῇ ἐγγύς ἐν τῷ αἰεί τοῦ Χριστοῦ). In Christ a great reversal has taken place. Here Paul shifts to a dramatic metaphor of spatial distance as the foundation of this depiction of Christian conversion. Before conversion (ὁι ποτε ἄντες...) his Gentile readers were μακρὰν (far off). With this dramatic image he alludes to all that he has just declared in verse 12 about the Gentiles in their pagan days. Those days meant they were a long ways away from God. He was distant to them, and they to Him. To be far away from God is to be separated from God.

But note the contrast between ‘then’ (ποτε) and ‘now’ (νῦν) present here. The now, νῦν, is an emphatic expression, rather than the more common temporal...
adverb for now, υものです. It is not just ‘now’; rather, it is “NOW!” The coming of Christ into their lives has brought dramatic change and transformation. Central here to Paul’s expression is that the coming of Christ has brought them “near” (ἐγγὺς) to God. God is now reachable; He is accessible; He is Father.

What makes the difference? How do we move from “far away” to “near”? Paul’s answer here is twofold: ἐν Χριστῷ Ἰσόῦ (“in Christ Jesus”) and ἐν τῷ αἵατῳ τῦ Χριστοῦ (“in/by the blood of Christ”). To come into spiritual union with Christ takes place through the blood of Christ. Christ and the cross are inseparably linked. And the cross means blood – blood being poured out in sacrificial death. It’s grizzly; it’s horrible; it’s repugnant. But it’s essential and critical to our moving from “afar off” to “near.”

This is a foundational teaching of the New Testament. 1 Peter 1:18-19 sums up the link this way:

18 You know that you were ransomed from the futile ways inherited from your ancestors, not with perishable things like silver or gold, 19 but with the precious blood of Christ, like that of a lamb without defect or blemish.

Christ’s shed blood is the key to our salvation. The connection of all this to us today who are overwhelmingly Gentile Christians is obvious. Outside of Christ our spiritual condition is dismal and bleak. In truth, it is living in spiritual death. But in the blood of Christ we have come into spiritual union with Christ. And this means that we have been brought near to God whom we now have relationship with and access to. What a powerful declaration of scripture!
This second segment presents several challenges for clear understanding. It clearly stands as a justification (γάρ) for what Paul has just said about the BC / AD condition of his Gentile readers. Obviously it is the center piece of the three fold passage division as the Block Diagram of the Greek text visually illustrates. But what of the background of this rather well crafted and somewhat poetical declaration about Christ?

Many NT scholars are inclined to see hymnic structure to these statements. But is there enough evidence to justify such claims?

The answer to this question depends in part on the connection of Eph. 2:14-18 to Col. 1:15-20, which is generally thought to be remnants of an early Christian hymn:

15 He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation; 16 for in him all things in heaven and on earth were created, things visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or powers—all things have been created through him and for him. 17 He himself is before all things, and in him all things hold together. 18 He is the head of the body, the church; he is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, so that he might come to have first place in everything. 19 For in him all the fulness of God was pleased to dwell, 20 and through him God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, by making peace through the blood of his cross.

This probable early Christian hymnic expression is often seen as the model for Eph. 2:14-18 and as a piece of pre-formed Christian tradition that is incorporated into Paul’s letter. The surrounding context of Col. 1: 12-14 and 1:21-23 bears some resemblance thematically to Eph. 2:11-3 and 2:19-22. But enough differences exist to seriously question whether this similarity to Colossians points to a hymnic origin for 2:14-18. More likely they point to a common author treating generally related themes.

Another basis for the hymnic understanding is the perception of a chiasmic structure in 2:14-18 or an even larger chunk of the text. Various proposals exist but usually follow to some extent the one proposed by Thomas Yoder in the Believer’s Church Bible Commentary (iPreach) incorporating the entire passage:

A Once strangers and aliens without God (2:11–12)
B Christ has brought near the far (2:13)
A’ Now no longer strangers, but part of God’s home (2:19–22)

B’ Christ is our peace (2:14–16)

Although initially appealing, this schema has numerous problems connected to it, as Andrew Lincoln (Word Biblical Commentary, Logos Systems) points out:

Some of the indications that hymnic material could lie behind this section are the break with the surrounding context of the contrast schema, the “we” style that interrupts the “you” style of address to the readers in vv 11–13 and vv 19–22, the opening emphatic predication (“he is our peace”), and pointedly Christological content of the material, the heavy use of participles, the apparent parallelismus membrorum, the piling up of a number of hapax legomena, and awkward syntax which suggests interpretation. Such features, in the light of the analysis which follows, have made it seem more probable that we are dealing with hymnic material that has been reworked (cf. also Schlier, 122–23; Schille, Frühchristliche Hymnen, 24–31; J. T. Sanders, ZNW 56 [1965] 216–18; Fischer, Tendenz, 131–37; Gnilka, 147–52; idem, “Christus unser Friede,” 190–207; Barth, 261–62; Burger, Schöpfung, 117–33; Wengst, Christologische Formeln, 181–86; Lindemann, Aufhebung, 156–59; Martin, Reconciliation, 168–71) than with a straightforward argument (pace Mussner, Christus, 100–101; Merklein, BZ 17 [1973] 79–102; Ernst, 314–21; Schnackenburg, 106–7, 112).

But what is the extent of such hymnic material? Against those who would include v 17 or v 18 (cf. Schlier, 123; Schille, Frühchristliche Hymnen, 24–31; Gnilka, 147–52; idem, “Christus unser Friede,” 197–200; Barth, 276; Fisher Tendenz, 132; Burger, Schöpfung, 128–33), it must be said that the language and concepts of v 17 come from the OT passage Isa 57:19, clearly take up v 13, and are formulated as an address to the readers (cf. the introduction of the second person plural ὑμῖν), and that v 18 reads more like the writer’s own summary of the significance of the preceding verses in language reminiscent of Rom 5:2. In addition, neither v 17 or v 18 easily provides reconstructed lines which would be of an appropriate length for the original hymnic material (cf. also Wengst, Christologische Formeln, 182–83). It is behind vv 14–16 that there may well be traditional material which spoke of Christ as the one who provides cosmic peace and reconciliation (cf. also J. T. Sanders, ZNW 56 [1965] 216–18; Wengst, Christologische Formeln, 181–86; Lindemann, Aufhebung, 156–59; Martin, Reconciliation, 172).

Now all of us can come to the Father through the same Holy Spirit because of what Christ has done for us.
commentators that 2:14-18 assumes Paul’s midrashic interpretation of Isa. 57:19 and it has some possible merit, but is limited. In my opinion the existing structure of 2:14-18 should be attributed to the composition of Ephesians itself, rather than to some pre-existing document. But this does not exclude the borrowing of short phrases etc. from such material.

The present syntactical structure of the Greek text breaks the ideas down into two main emphases:

1. He himself is our peace...and
2. He has proclaimed peace to the far and near ones.

The Block Diagram of the Greek text highlights this core structure.

1. He himself is our peace (Αὐτός γὰρ ἔστιν ἡ ἔιρήνη ἡμῶν). The central declaration is the Christ is our peace. What is meant by this? Peace between Jew and Gentile? Peace between sinful humanity and God? Or, both of the above? Probably the latter is the major point. Peace means that those afar off (Gentiles) have been brought near so that both groups (Jew & Gentile) now stand near, i.e., within access to God. But given the bitter animosity toward one another, they could only come together peacefully through a major miracle of transformation. Christ himself facilitates that transformation into peace with God and peace with one another.

If Isa. 57:19 is in Paul’s mind to some extent, then his use of its terminology in the LXX goes counter to the current scribal interpretation. The far ones in scribal Judaism were Jewish Diaspora and the near ones were Palestinian Jews living in the homeland. Later on, this text was reinterpreted in rabbinical circles with the far ones being Jewish sinners and the near ones being righteous Jews. See b. Berakot 34b, Num. Rab. 11.7 and Mek. Exod. 20.25 in the Talmud for details. But Lincoln (WBC, Logos Systems) calls attention to at least one rabbinical tradition that sees the contrast between Jews and Gentiles (proselytes): Num. Rab. 8.

What is peace (ἡ ἔιρήνη)? Again, Lincoln (WBC, Logos Systems) gives a helpful summation:

As is well known, in the OT, the notion of peace (שלום, šalom) involves more than the absence of war or cessation of hostilities. It denotes also positive well-being and salvation, and it is frequently seen as God’s gift and as a major element of eschatological expectation. In this context in Eph 2, peace does, however, stand primarily for the cessation of hostilities and the resulting situation of unity. It is a relational concept which presupposes the overcoming of alienation (cf. vv 12, 13) and hostility (cf. v 15) between Gentiles and Jews. It is possible that for a Jew such a notion would recall the vision of eschatological peace which would prevail when the Gentiles joined Israel in worship in the temple in Zion, a vision found in Isa 2:2–4 and Micah 4:1–4, although there is no conscious effort to invoke such prophecies here. It is neither peace with God (Rom 5:1) nor cosmic peace (Col 1:20) that is the focus of attention in v 14, although it becomes clear in vv 16–18 that the former is foundational for this writer also. Peace, in v 14, is not merely a concept nor even a new state of affairs, it is bound up with a person. Christ can be said to be not only a peacemaker or a bringer of peace but peace in person. The title “prince of peace” in Isa 9:6 may have prepared the way for such an attribution of peace to a person, but the language here is hardly an allusion to that verse (contra Stuhlmacher, “Er ist unser Friede,” 345).

Later rabbinic thought could call the name of God and of the Messiah “peace” (cf. Str-B 3:587) but not, of course, in specific connection with Jews and Gentiles. That Christ himself is seen as the peace between the two groups here in v 14 is in line with the thought of v 15 that the making of peace, by creating one new person in place of two, occurred “in himself.” This identification of Christ with the blessings of salvation that he brings can be found in other places in the Pauline corpus (cf. 1 Cor 1:30; Col 1:27; 3:4).

With three participle phrases, Paul amplifies Christ as the source of peace.

a) “in his flesh he has made both groups into one” (ὁ ποιήσας τὰ ἁµώτερα ἕν). Christ is the one who has brought Jew and Gentile together before God on a common plane. God seeks a unified people who serve Him. In Christ, such becomes possible. For the first century world -- and for ours as well -- the notion that Jews and Gentiles can come together on one footing before God was radical, and humanly impossible.

b) “and has broken down the dividing wall, that is, the hostility between us” (δὲ...καὶ τὸ µεσότιµαν τοῦ φραγµοῦ λύσας, τὴν ἔχθραν ἐν τῇ σαρκὶ αὐτοῦ). Christ has broken down the partitionary wall. What’s that? The appositional qualifier that follows, “the hostility between us” (τὴν ἔχθραν), defines it to some extent. Very possibly Paul had in mind the wall of partition in the Jerusalem temple that separated the Court of the Gentiles from the other inner courts where
for worship. At the entrance to the inner courts was the above warning threatening death to any Gentile who crossed into the courts where Jews worshipped God. The trumped up accusation by Jewish purists that Paul had indeed encouraged a Gentile, a Trophimus from Ephesus no less, to cross to that boundary in the Jerusalem temple was the reason for his imprisonment at Caesarea (cf. Acts 21:27-31). Most likely the Ephesians were aware of this incident in Jerusalem by this time. Although Paul had not actually encouraged Trophimus to do this out of respect for Jewish laws, he knew that in truth God had crossed out that warning chiseled in stone at the entrance gate of the temple inner courts.

c) “He has abolished the law with its commandments and ordinances, that he might create in himself one new humanity in place of the two, thus making peace, 16 and might reconcile both groups to God in one body through the cross, thus putting to death that hostility through it.” (δ... τὸν νόμον τὸν ἑντολὸν ἐν δόγμασιν καταργήσας, ἵνα τούς δύο κτίσῃ ἐν αὐτῷ εἰς ἕνα καινὸν ἀνθρωπόν ποιῶν εἰρήνην καὶ ἀποκαταλάβῃ τοὺς ἀμφότερους ἐν ἔνι σωματίῳ τῷ δεόν τοῦ σταυροῦ, ἀποκτείνας τὴν εἰρήνα ἐν αὐτῷ). This most radical declaration is that in Christ God had done away with the Law. But the participle καταργήσας more precisely means that God rendered the Law useless as a means of salvation, as so understood in the Judaism of Paul’s day. Paul is not saying that God did away with the Old Testament. Nor with the Law itself, as embedded in the Old Testament. In Gal. 3:19-25, Paul earlier wrote that the Law serves a worthwhile purpose to define sinful activity and thus to point us to Christ. But, under no means can it provide salvation. The very hostility between Jew and Gentile in Paul’s world was evidence of that. Christ alone can nullify that hostility and enable peace to reign. His intent in dying on the cross was 1) “that he might create in himself one new humanity in place of the two, thus making peace,” and 2) “and might reconcile both groups to God in one body through the cross.” The impact? “thus putting to death that hostility through it.”

2. He has proclaimed peace both to the far off and to the near ones: “17 So he came and proclaimed peace to you who were far off and peace to those who were near; 18 for through him both of us have access in one Spirit to the Father” (17 καὶ ἔλθω ἐγγέγειλός εἰρήνην ὑμῖν τοῖς μακράν καὶ εἰρήνην τοῖς ἐγγὺς 18 ὅτι δ’ αὐτῷ ἔχομεν τὴν προσαγωγὴν οἱ ἀμφότεροι ἐν ἕνι πνεύματι πρὸς τὸν πατέρα). Here Paul brings the tois makran / tois eγγυς (Gentile / Jew) contrast to the forefront. Now only is Christ Peace in its very embodiment, he has proclaimed this peace to both Jew and Gentile. Paul understood that the ministry of the historical Jesus was focused on the Jewish people. But he also saw what the gospel writers knew. Jesus ministry and message was ultimately for all humanity. It was not a message that before becoming a Christian you have to convert to Judaism because salvation belongs only to Jews. The cross of Christ nullifies any such thinking! This is the universal thrust of the Gospel.

In verse 18 Paul bases this universal thrust of the Gospel on the theological principle that both Jew and Gentile alike have access to the Father through the one Holy Spirit. This echoes the language of Rom. 5:1-2, “1 Therefore, since we are justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, 2 through whom we have obtained access to this grace in which we stand; and we boast in our hope of sharing the glory of God” (RSV). Paul will pick up the access theme again in Eph. 3:12, “Christ Jesus our Lord, 12 in whom we have access to God in boldness and confidence through faith in him.” That entrance gate in the Jerusalem temple was the visible access to God in the minds of Jews in Paul’s day. Above it was the above listed inscribed stone forbidding Gentiles access. But that stone God removed at Calvary.

The marvelous truths of these verses concerning the work of Christ have tremendous relevance to our lives today as Christians. Our world is torn apart with hostility between groups of people using religion, ethnicity, social status, nationalism, political ideology et al. as the basis of hostility toward other groups. Even among Christian groups, partitioning walls have been built up around denominationalism, doctrine etc. We Baptists have a miserable track record in recent times for divisiveness. But there’s hope for us as Baptists. The Celebration of New Covenant Baptists meeting in Atlanta (Jan. 30-Feb. 1, 2008) holds great promise for most Baptist groups in North America of finding ways to work together with a unified commitment to the Gospel of Christ.
c. Vanished differences, vv. 19-22

Greek NT

19 ἂρα συνοικεῖτε ἐστὲ ξένοι καὶ πάροικοι ἀλλὰ ἐστὲ συμπολίται τῶν ἁγίων καὶ οἰκεῖοι τοῦ θεοῦ, 20 ἐποικοδομήθητες ἐπὶ τῷ θεμελίῳ τῶν ἁπατσώλων καὶ προφητῶν, ὅταν ἄρα τὸ ἐκκλησίας ἄρα τῶν ἁγίων "πᾶσα ἀναγέννησις αὐτῶν ἐπὶ τῷ θεμελίῳ τῶν ἁπατσώλων καὶ προφητῶν, ὅταν ἄρα τὸ ἐκκλησίας ἄρα τῶν ἁγίων诸葛亮江山代有才人出，各领风骚数百年。外人和本地人不再是陌生人和外人，而是圣徒的公民，也是神的家的成员。基督耶稣自己是房角石，

NASB

19 So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are fellow citizens with the saints, and are of God's household, 20 having been built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus Himself being the corner stone, 21 in whom the whole building, being fitted together, is growing into a holy temple in the Lord; 22 in whom you also are being built together into a dwelling of God in the Spirit.

NRSV

19 So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are citizens with the saints and also members of the household of God, 20 built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the cornerstone. 21 In him the whole structure is joined together and grows into a holy temple in the Lord; 22 in whom you also are built together spiritually into a dwelling place for God.

NLT

19 So now you Gentiles are no longer strangers and foreigners. You are citizens along with all of God’s holy people. You are members of God’s family. 20 Together, we are his house, built on the foundation of the apostles and the prophets. And the cornerstone is Christ Jesus himself. 21 We are carefully joined together in him, becoming a holy temple for the Lord. 22 Through him you Gentiles are also being made part of this dwelling where God lives by his Spirit.

Notes:

Almost in summary fashion, Paul draws some implications from the reconciling work of Christ in the previous discussion of vv. 14-18. He gathers up some of the beginning motifs of vv. 11-13. But the image of a new temple is the major motif of his thoughts here.

The syntactical structure of the two core expressions is “not that” but “this.” The positive side is couched in the temporal “no longer” (οὐκέτα). He returns to the second person plural verb focus thus highlighting attention on his initial Gentile readers. Two sets of traits stand on either side of the contrast:

Not that:
1) strangers (ξένοι).
2) aliens (πάροικοι).

But this:
1) citizens with the saints (συμπολίται τῶν ἁγίων)
2) members of the household of God (οἰκεῖοι τοῦ θεοῦ)

A subtle play on contrastive words is present in the Greek text that can’t be reproduced in English translation. The first label on either side of the contrast plays off being either a non-citizen or a citizen. The second label in each contrast builds off the image of being either (outside the household) or being a household member. So the parallels move from citizenship to family membership. These two dramatic images for Paul’s world help highlight the miraculous transformation that takes place in coming to Christ. Gentile Christians in Christ now stand as righteous members of those dedicated to God, the saints. They additionally have been adopted into God’s family with equal status to their Jewish Christian brothers.

In the participial clause expansion of vv. 20-22 the citizenship/family images shift to that of a house under construction (ἐποικοδομηθέντες). The Aorist passive participle form implies the construction process has already been put in place. This house, we discover at the end of the clause, is nothing less than a new dwelling place for God in this world. Thus it replaces the temple in Jerusalem.

Several modifiers of the participle add details to the temple image. Its foundation is the gospel message of the apostles and (probably) Christian prophets of the apostolic era. The cornerstone or cap stone that holds everything together is Jesus Christ himself. With the laying of each stone, a Christian community, a new temple is under construction. Gentile believers are a critical segment of that building. God already lives in this “under construction” temple while it is being built. He does so through His Spirit. The construction takes place “in Christ.”

Wow! What a privilege we possess! God be praised for including us in His eternal plan.
11 Therefore remember that formerly you, the Gentiles in the flesh, who are called “Uncircumcision” by the so-called “Circumcision,” which is performed in the flesh by human hands—12 remember that you were at that time separate from Christ, excluded 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 formerly were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ.

14 For He Himself is our peace, who made both groups into one and broke down the barrier of the dividing wall, 15 by abolishing in His flesh the enmity, which is the Law of commandments contained in ordinances, that he might create in himself one new humanity in place of the two, thus making peace, 16 and might reconcile both groups to God through the cross, he broke down the wall of hostility that was between us. 15 He has abolished the law with its commandments and ordinances, that he might make in himself one new humanity in place of the two, thus making peace, 16 and might reconcile both groups to God in one body through the cross, thus putting to death that hostility through it. 17 So He came and proclaimed peace to you who were far away, and peace to those who were near; 18 for through Him we both have our 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 are of God’s household, 20 having been made near by the blood of Christ. 14 For Christ himself has brought peace to us. He united Jews and Gentiles into one people when, in his own body on the cross, he broke down the wall of hostility that separated us. 15 He did this by ending the system of law with its commandments and regulations. He made peace between Jews and Gentiles by creating in himself one new people from the two groups. 16 Together as one body, Christ reconciled both groups to God by means of his death on the cross, and our hostility toward each other was put to death. 17 He brought this Good News of peace to you Gentiles used to be outsiders. You were called “uncircumcised heathens” by the Jews, who were proud of their circumcision, even though it affected only their bodies and not their hearts. 12 In those days you were living apart from Christ. You were excluded from citizenship among the people of Israel, and you did not know the covenant promises God had made to them. You lived in this world without God and without hope. 13 But now you have been united with Christ Jesus. Once you were far away from God, but now you have been brought near to him through the blood of Christ.
built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus Himself being the corner stone, in whom the whole building, being fitted together, is growing into a holy temple in the Lord; in whom you also are being built together into a dwelling of God in the Spirit.

The household of God, built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the cornerstone. In him the whole structure is joined together and grows into a holy temple in the Lord; in whom you also are being built together spiritually into a dwelling place for God.

who were far away from him, and peace to the Jews who were near. Now all of us can come to the Father through the same Holy Spirit because of what Christ has done for us. So now you Gentiles are no longer strangers and foreigners. You are citizens along with all of God’s holy people. You are members of God’s family. Together, we are his house, built on the foundation of the apostles and the prophets. And the cornerstone is Christ Jesus himself. We are carefully joined together in him, becoming a holy temple for the Lord. Through him you Gentiles are also being made part of this dwelling where God lives by his Spirit.
11 Δίο μνημονεύετε

οτι ποτε ύμεις τα ἔθη (ήτε)
ἐν σαρκί,
οἱ λεγόμενοι ἀκροβυσσία
ὑπὸ τῆς λεγομένης περιτομῆς
ἐν σαρκὶ χειροποιήτου,

12 οτι ήτε

τω καιρω ἐκείνω
χωρὶς Χρίστου,

ἀπηλλοτριωμένοι τῆς πολιτείας τοῦ Ἰσραήλ
καὶ
ξένοι τῶν διαθηκῶν τῆς ἐπαγγελίας,
ἐλπίδα μή ἔχοντες
καὶ
ἀθεοὶ
ἐν τῷ κόσμῳ.

13 δὲ

ὑμῶν
ἐν Χριστῷ Ἰησοῦ

14 ὁ ποιήσας τὰ ἁμαρτήματα ἐν
καὶ
τὸ μειστόριον τοῦ φραγμοῦ λύσας,
τὴν ἐξήραν,

ἐν τῇ σαρκὶ αὐτοῦ,

τοῦ νόμου τῶν ἐντολῶν καταργήσας,
ἐν δόγμασιν ἑνα τὸς δύο κτίσῃ
ἐν αὐτῷ
ἐν αὐτῷ
καὶ
ἐν αὐτῷ
καὶ
σωματί
καὶ

15 ἐν ἑνα καινὸν ἀνθρωπον

16 ποιῶν εἰρήνην,

καὶ

ἀποκαταλάξῃ τοὺς ἁμφότερους...τῷ θεῷ
ἐν ἑνί σώματι
dia τοῦ σταυροῦ,
ἀποκτείνας τὴν ἐξήραν
ἐν αὐτῷ,
καὶ ἐλθὼν

(εὐηγγελίσατο) εἰρήνην τοῖς ἔγγυς
dι' αὐτοῦ

οί άμφοτεροί
ἐν εἰν πνεύματι

πρὸς τὸν πατέρα,

ἀρα σὺν

οὐκὲτι ἐστε ξένοι
καὶ πάρρικοι,

ἀλλὰ ἐστε συμπολίται τῶν ἁγίων
καὶ οἰκεῖοι τοῦ θεοῦ,

ἐποικοδομησάντες:
ἐπὶ τῶν θεμέλιων τῶν ἀποστόλου καὶ προφητῶν,

ὁ τῶν ἁγίων αὐτοῦ Χριστοῦ Ἰησοῦ,

συναρμολογομένη
ἐν ὧν πάσα οἰκοδομή...αὔξει
eἰς ναὸν ἁγίου
ἐν κυρίῳ,

ἐν ὧ καὶ ὑμεῖς συνοικοδομεῖσθε
eἰς κατοικητήριον τοῦ θεοῦ
ἐν πνεύματι.
Summary of Rhetorical Structure

The twofold thought structure of the passage becomes clear with the emphatic inferential conjunctions ἀρα οὖν in verse 19. This stands in contradiction to the typical paragraphing break at verse 14 in most translations. Such ignores the role of the causal conjunction γάρ that introduces a set of justifications for the first two core expressions. It has the distorting effect of making the implications of statements 6 and 7 too dependent on the theological declarations of statements 3-5.

Additionally, the division of the passage into two sections, vv. 11-13, 14-22 (statement #1-2 and 3-7), ignores the obvious central role that the theological declarations concerning Christ in statements 3-5 play in this passage. Note the boxes above highlighting this.

Paul’s thoughts revolves around calling the Ephesians to remember their spiritual status before God as Christians (#s 1-2). This is based on the reconciling work of Christ (#s. 3-5). Out of that reconciliation comes a new status as the unified people of God (#s. 6-7).

He begins with a contrast. They need to remember what they were before Christ (# 1) and then what happened to them when they came to Christ (# 2). The temporal contrast between-ποτε and νυν frames the thoughts of these two statements. In statement 2, Paul introduces the spatial concept of μακρᾶν / ἐγγύς, but doesn’t develop it.

In the theological affirmations about Christ, #s 3-5, statements 4 and 5 pick up the contrast of τοὺς μακρᾶν and τοὺς ἐγγύς. Here these represent Gentiles (τοὺς μακρᾶν) and Jews (τοὺς ἐγγύς). But in Christ the both (οἱ ἀμφότεροι; τοὺς δύο) -- Jews and Gentiles -- have become one people ( εἶν).

The implications of this are made explicit when Paul returns to focus on his readers in statements 6 and 7. Here the implications of the μακρᾶν / ἐγγύς contrast become clear:

μακρᾶν  ἐγγύς

ζένοι  συμπολίται τῶν ἁγίων
πάρρικοι  οἰκεῖοι τοῦ θεοῦ

Paul envisions a marvelous bringing together of Jews and Gentiles in the reconciling work of God in Christ. In common commitment to Christ they become one people of God.