

THE NEW HUMANITY

Ephesians 2:14-16

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For he himself is our peace, who has made us both one and has broken down in his flesh the dividing wall of hostility by abolishing the law of commandments and ordinances, that he might create in himself one new man in place of the two, so making peace (Eph. 2:14-15).

Genesis chapter 11 records one of the great culminating moments in human history. Adam and Eve had fallen into sin, and the result was the violence depicted in the early chapters of Genesis. In chapter 11, mankind is united once more, joined in rebellion against God in an attempt to usurp his glory.

Genesis 11 begins, “Now the whole earth had one language and the same words... They said, ‘Come, let us build ourselves a city and a tower with its top in the heavens, and let us make a name for ourselves’” (Gen. 11:1, 4). This was, of course, all part of the devil’s subtle plan and an imitation of his own failed attempt to overthrow God’s rule. God, stooping down to this puny venture, confused their language, “And from there the Lord dispersed them over the face of all the earth” (Gen. 11:9). This was how the human race became scattered across the globe, divided into cultures and peoples and nations at war.

So it was with the human race from the Tower of Babel until the coming of Jesus Christ. Jesus came to undo the effects of sin, including the Tower of Babel. As John stated, “The reason the Son of God appeared was to destroy the works of the devil” (1 Jn. 3:8).

Therefore, if Genesis 11 is the culmination of the effects of sin, we should expect to see its reversal with Jesus' coming into the world.

This is the very thing we discover in the Book of Acts. On the day of Pentecost, just weeks after the resurrection of Christ and days after his ascension into heaven, the Holy Spirit was poured out by Christ upon his church. In that gathering were men from all the nations and languages created in judgment at Babel, now brought together by the Spirit of God. When the apostle Peter began preaching and the tongues of fire fell upon them, "They were amazed and astonished, saying... 'How is it that we hear, each of us in his own native language?'... And all were amazed and perplexed, saying to one another, 'What does this mean?'" (Acts 2:7-12).

What did it mean? It meant the coming of peace in Jesus Christ to the scattered tribes of men. This is something Paul wants the readers of Ephesians to understand. They were Gentiles living in Asia Minor. They had been, verse 12 says, "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." Now, in Christ, they have been "brought near by the blood of Christ" (v. 13), reconciled to God by the cross. But there is something more for them to know and experience, namely, that the never-ending war brought on by sin has now been won. We are at peace with God, yes, but we can also have peace with men. Ephesians 2:16 states that Christ reconciled us to God in such a way that he brought us together "in one body through the cross, thus killing the hostility." Here, Paul proclaims good news of peace: peace made possible through Christ's death, peace made real through Christ's resurrection, and peace experienced in the new humanity that is the body of Christ.

PEACE MADE POSSIBLE THROUGH CHRIST'S DEATH

We know that Christ's death reconciles believers to God. This is what Paul emphasized in verse 13: "You who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ." But as his teaching continues, he points out that Christ's death also makes peace possible within the human race.

The reason is given in verse 14. Paul speaks of the fundamental division within humanity, that between Jews and Gentiles. This was an outworking of the division created by God back in Genesis 3:15. God cursed the serpent, saying, “I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and her offspring.” This was a provision of mercy and of protection for God’s people. Without this enmity, they would become part of the sinful world and be absorbed in the rebellion to God. Their preservation, and thus of the holy seed who would be their Savior, required that there be hostility between the people of God and the people of the world. In the time of the New Testament, this division was that between the Jews and the Gentiles as mandated by the Old Testament legal code.

Paul refers to “the dividing wall of hostility”, created by “the law of commandments and ordinances.” In a previous study we recalled the physical wall that kept Gentiles out of the temple courts, with warnings that threatened death to any who might cross. This seems to be in Paul’s mind as a symbol for the whole system of rules designed to keep Jews separate from Gentiles. They could not sit down to a meal with Gentiles or even eat the same foods. They dressed differently. They could not intermarry or enter into real friendships. To the Gentiles, this made the Jews seem strange and aloof. The Jews came to regard the Gentiles as unclean and inferior.

Paul says that Jesus abolished all this and broke down the wall “in his flesh”. This refers to his atoning death on the cross. Prior to Jesus’ coming the system of the Old Testament law was the means by which the Jewish people entered into and expressed their relationship to God. No one else could come near to God. But, as Paul explains in Galatians 3:23-29, all that was a temporary measure to preserve the integrity of the covenant people until the Messiah should come. Jesus’ coming abolished the administration of the Mosaic Law and offered everyone access to God through his death. Here is how Paul explained it in Galatians:

The law was our guardian until Christ came, in order that we might be justified by faith. But now that faith has come, we are no longer under a guardian, for in Christ Jesus you are all sons of God, through faith... There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus (Gal. 3:24-28).

Christianity was able quickly to become a worldwide religion, as God intended, in part because cultural barriers could be overcome by the grace and truth of the gospel. Once the apostles understood that Christianity is to transcend every human division, they vigorously opposed every attempt to force Jewish cultural practices on Gentile converts. Anyone could become a child of God, just as they are, through a living faith in Jesus Christ.

Jesus himself foreshadowed this when he sat down on a well next to a Samaritan woman, recorded in John 4. She was amazed, because no Jewish man would ever sit and talk with a Gentile woman, much less ask her to give him a drink as Jesus did. Jesus spoke to her about the living water he offers to all who believe. In response to her puzzlement, Jesus said, “The hour is coming, and is now here, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for the Father is seeking such people to worship him” (Jn. 4:23). That woman became the first evangelist to the Samaritans; people heard about Jesus and came to him, crying, “We know that this is indeed the Savior of the world” (Jn. 4:42).

When Paul says Jesus abolished the law, he does not mean the moral law, such as the Ten Commandments, which expresses God’s unchangeable character. Jesus said, “Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them” (Mt. 5:17). Likewise, God’s people today are to obey God’s moral law. But we are no longer to uphold those temporary regulations that separated Jews from Gentiles and protected God’s people from contact with unbelievers.

This is a vital matter today, when too many Christians think holiness is about checking out of the culture. Many Christians think they are being holy if they have no non-Christian friends, if they enjoy only Christian entertainment, if they have nothing to do with their neighbors or treat their unbelieving co-workers as unclean. But Christ’s death has freed God’s people from the juvenile bonds of such legalism; we now are to go out into the world, being in the world but not of it, as the salt that preserves it from death and the light that shines in the darkness. Jesus treated the woman by the well as a person of dignity and worth; though she was a Samaritan, he asked

her to do a service for him. Though he was the very kind of person she had learned to hate, she was drawn to him because of his combination of grace and truth.

Christ's death has made peace within this world possible, through the gospel of his salvation. We are now his ambassadors, not of judgment and wrath but of the reconciliation God offers to all. As Paul said, so we say today, "We are ambassadors for Christ, God making his appeal through us. We implore you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God" (2 Cor. 5:20).

PEACE REALIZED THROUGH CHRIST'S RESURRECTION

Christ's death makes peace possible not only between man and God, but also among men. But Jesus did not merely die; he also rose from the grave, and it is his resurrection that actually creates peace. This is why we must always hold the cross and the open tomb together. Christ's death removes God's barriers to our acceptance, but it is the spiritual resurrection that takes place within us, as an out-working of Christ's resurrection, that changes us and brings us to God. It is by the Holy Spirit that we are, as Paul said in Ephesians 2:4, "made alive together with Christ." Now, Paul adds that Christ, by the power of his resurrection, has created "in himself one new man in the place of the two, so making peace" (Eph. 2:15).

Paul says that in making us his disciples, Jesus created a new humanity and made us part of it. We are the people of his resurrection life, partaking of his power and joining the family of God. Jesus does not make peace by persuading two different types of people to get along for a while. He does not say to the Gentiles that they must be kind to Jews and vice versa. He says, "You are no longer what you were. Do not think of yourself as a Jew any longer or as a Gentile any longer. Think of yourself as a Christian, a new kind of person. This is especially important today: we are no longer white or black, rich or poor, Northern or Southern – we are Christians. Christianity is not a band-aid on the old humanity, with all its conflict and division. Christianity is a new humanity in Christ, in his resurrection, a humanity that has passed through the death of the cross and through the open tomb of the resurrection to receive eternal life.

What is it that makes us members of this new humanity? The answer is, of course, the new birth, which is what happens when someone believes in Jesus. Paul said in 2 Corinthians 5:17, “If anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come.” This is Paul’s point here, that in Christ we are something new; Christ died and rose again that he “might reconcile us both to God in one body through the cross, thereby killing the hostility.” Jesus brings us to God in such a way that he also brings us to one another. He gives us a new life and a new identity which now we share with all our brothers and sisters in him.

This is the most radical way of making peace, by actually making us one. The closest analogy we have to this is to be part of a natural family. We say that blood is thicker than water. Family members stick together and help one another, even when they don’t get along. How much thicker is the bond of the Spirit. Jesus makes us one by giving each of us the same Spirit, bringing all of us into God’s family and making us brothers and sisters for all eternity. This is the true basis for Christian unity: our mutual relationship to God, our mutual love for Christ, and our mutual indwelling by the same Holy Spirit so that we experience a spiritual oneness in Christ.

PEACE EXPERIENCED IN THE NEW HUMANITY IN CHRIST

This tells us what the church is: one new man in Jesus Christ, the new humanity that will live forever and partake in Christ’s glory throughout all ages. This is why reflecting upon Paul’s message in Ephesians will remind us of the significance of the Christian church. There is nothing else like it, nothing else more important, and nothing else more worthy of our commitment, sacrifice and contribution. We are not a social club, not a self-help society. We are the new creation brought about by the Spirit of God through the resurrection of Christ, the holy society of heaven living in this present evil world.

Do you see why it is so important that we should love the church? Do you see why it is so vital that we pursue holiness with a passion? The church is the bride of Christ, the new humanity of the resurrection! Angels gaze upon us even now in wonder. Do you see why it is so important to be a part of the church? Only the church can know the

peace of God, because it is in the church that Christ is making peace, through faith in him.

God sent Jesus to reconcile sinners to himself, verse 16 says, “in one body through the cross, thereby killing the hostility.” So if you want to be part of this new humanity, you must come to the cross. This is Paul’s logic in the second half of Ephesians 2: “But now in Christ Jesus you who were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ... that he might create one new man in the place of the two, so making peace” (vv. 13-15). To be part of Christ’s church you must enter through the cross, and having come to the cross you must enter into Christ’s church, the resurrection humanity where Christ reigns in peace.

One of the great signs of assurance of salvation is to experience this unity and peace. Have you ever encountered someone with whom you would have no natural reason for friendship? But he or she is a Christian. You begin to talk about our Savior. God’s Word enters your conversation and your hearts are drawn together. That is a strong sign of God’s Spirit dwelling in your life. And it causes the world to marvel, that in Christ we transcend every division the world knows and which the world cannot overcome – racial, national, economic, occupational – and in Christ enjoy a spiritual union bathed in love.

Paul’s description of the church has the most profound implications for our approach to ministry. We are told today that people like to be with others just like themselves. Church marketing experts tell us that if we pick out one kind of person and focus on their preferences they will flock to the church and others who are like them will follow.¹ The result is one church for hip young white people, another for black people, another for Hispanics; one for the intellectuals, another for the emotionally needy; one for the outgoing and another for the reserved. The church today has become a sort of multiplex movie theatre. Many churches even divide their own congregation with one service that is liturgical, another that is traditional, and another that is rock-n-roll. It

¹ This is referred to as the *homogeneous unit principle*.

is a brilliantly successful approach – if numbers are what really matters.

But Paul says the church is to be one new man in Christ. Christ wants to bring together otherwise hostile groups into one new body. Christ is not glorified when people get together on the basis of human divisions or preferences. The world does that. What glorifies Christ is to find all different kinds of people together because of their spiritual bond in Christ. We want young and old, single and married, hip and square, rich and poor together, from every tribe and race. How is this possible? Only by the Spirit of God, uniting in Christ people who would otherwise have nothing to do with each other.

To a certain extent a particular church is bound to have a particular cultural feel, simply because it has a history. But there is a Christian culture that transcends all that. Worship should not be determined by cultural tradition, but should be shaped by the Bible as much as possible. We should mainly do things that Christians of all generations would recognize as distinctively Christian: confessing our sin and hearing God's pardon, proclaiming the creed, reading Scripture, praying, singing psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs (Col. 3: 16), preaching the Word, receiving the sacraments. As we mature as believers we love more and more those things that are biblical and care less for those things of our cultural background. We are people of the new in Christ, and not of the old of the world.

UNITED IN CHRIST

I want to conclude with three observations that flow from this text. The first has to do with the kind of peace God is making in this world. It is an inward peace, a peace of love and harmony and fellowship. It is not merely the cessation of fighting or arguing, and Christians should never settle for that.

So do you know the kind of peace Paul is talking about? Is it found in your home, in your relationships at work, in your marriage? It is not always possible for us to enjoy the kind of peace we desire when it comes to non-Christians. Paul says in Romans 12:18, "So far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all." But in our relationships with Christians, and especially in our homes, we should experience

this peace. It happens as we walk with God by the power of his Spirit and under the authority of his Word. Paul exhorts us in Colossians 3:15-16, “Let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in one body. And be thankful. Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly.”

So why do many Christians know so little of this peace? I think it is because we do not realize all that is possible in the normal Christian life. I think it is because we do not know how willing and how able God is to answer our prayers with a supernatural work in our lives. Most Christians live as close to the world as they can and are under its influence, instead of living close to God and under his influence. We are to be in the world, but not of it. We lack peace because we lack holiness, that is, the renewing work of the Holy Spirit that turns our hearts to God. We do not take seriously the words of our Lord, “Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you” (Jn. 14:27).

Second, this passage should transform our idea of what the church is. The church is not just a building or an institution. The church is a new human race, the eternal family of God’s people whose work will endure long after every merely human achievement has fallen into dust. It is in the church that God is displaying his glory (Eph. 3:10), so God calls his people to serve for the up-building of the church (Eph. 4:12). You are called to use your gifts, contribute your time and money, your prayers and your tears, for the blessing and growth of the church, the new humanity in Christ.

Since Jesus bought the church with his blood in order to make peace, we should all loathe to disturb this peace and to bring division or conflict into the church. Apart from false teaching, nothing hurts a church more than division and conflict. So if we are part of a faithful, biblical church, then we should do everything possible to seek the purity and peace of the church. God forbid that any of us should disturb the peace of Christ’s church, which he purchased with his precious blood.

Lastly, this gives us a whole new perspective on the glory of Christ’s saving work. We tend to think only about what Jesus does for us as individuals. But here we see a vast and grand panorama. Christ has overthrown the devil’s work in the world. He has formed a new

people for himself: a new race that transcends all the old conflicts, a new kingdom that overwhelms former allegiances and hostilities. Christ has not merely made some repairs on the old broken-down humanity. He has made something glorious and new in its place, using the raw materials of the fallen creation, cleansing us from sin and breathing into us the new life of his resurrection, thus making peace. This is where God's plan for history is heading, the fallen creation redeemed and restored in Christ: "The wolf shall dwell with the lamb, and the leopard shall lie down with the young goat, and the calf and the lion and the fattened calf together... They shall not hurt or destroy in all my holy mountain; for the earth shall be full of the knowledge of the Lord as the waters cover the sea" (Isa. 11:6, 9).

This is our reality in Christ, and it is our future in Christ. As we trust in him and seek his peace, this resurrection reality will be our present experience in increasing measure, to our great blessing and to the glory of the grace of God.