

Union With Christ *Paul's Letter to the Ephesians*

Reconciliation in Christ *Ephesians 2:14 – 16*

Introduction: Aragorn

When I was a kid, my dad read me bedtime stories. But these weren't just ordinary bedtime stories. It was J.R.R. Tolkien's *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings*. I loved it. Naturally I was psyched when the movies came out. One of the aspects of the story we really like is the character of Aragorn. Viggo Mortensen has a good far-away, haunted look on his face. Now for those of you who need a refreshing or don't mind one, Aragorn is the true king of all humanity, the heir of Isildur, but he is in exile. Centuries ago, Isildur had betrayed humanity by snatching the One Ring, rather than throwing it into Mount Doom to be destroyed. Centuries went by, and the race of humanity fell into disunity. Two major kingdoms emerged: Arnor and Gondor, along with pockets of men elsewhere, like the riders of Rohan, the Rangers of Eriador, and others. Arnor was fractured into three kingdoms and overthrown by the leading Nazgul, or Black Rider. Gondor, meanwhile, waited. This is the situation that Aragorn steps into. In the first book, he protects Frodo and withstands the greatest of temptations. He doesn't snatch the Ring of Power and shows himself worthy of being the heir to the throne, even superior to his ancestors. He shows himself worthy again when he and Theoden King of Rohan and only a few men are trapped by orcs at Helm's Deep. Theoden asks the question, 'What do you against such hate?' Aragorn says his now famous, 'Ride out to meet them.' He persuades Rohan to come to the aid of Gondor, despite the distrust that had built up between them. In the third book, he goes to Gondor and lead the forces against Sauron's army. Slowly you start to see Aragorn regather the disunified race of humanity around himself. He will unite them. He will defeat the Dark Lord, he will redeem the race of Isildur. And he will be their peace.

Jesus is the king. He is regathering the human race under his kingship, a race that was broken by Adam's sin. He is bringing us into unity, and he is our peace. This has implications for the way we treat each other.

Relevance

We're going to look at what Christian unity really is and why it's important. To do this I'm going to look at Ephesians 2:14 – 16.

Overview: Show Chiasm for parallelism

The first thing to notice is that the section in which v.14 – 16 is found, which is v.11 – 22, is a poem. It's in the inverted parallel form, a.k.a. chiasm. This is a very common Hebraic way of writing, and it was probably used to help people remember the body of the message. It's called an inverted parallel because the first line parallels the last, the second line parallels the second to last, and so on, until you come to the center-most line. That center-most line is the main point of emphasis.

The second thing to notice is that the poem talks about Jesus regathering humanity into one community under his kingship. There is the 'one body' in v.16 that we are made a part of. We are 'members of the household of God' in v.19. And there is the new Temple in v.20-22, the new place where God's shekinah glory dwells. This is Paul's basic vision for unity. I want to stress that Jesus did not come to produce a bunch of individualists doing 'quiet times.' He came to create one new body, one new humanity, one new community headed up by Jesus as the king.

We have to critique Western individualism here. Because it leads us to think that being a Christian is like playing the violin. You can do it with others, but you can also do it alone. But being a Christian is actually like playing football. Can you play football alone? Is there any way to do that? No. So what is the role of Christian community? How important is it?

Show Chiasm for 'in Jesus'

The third thing I want you to notice is that the new humanity is actually located 'in Jesus.' If you follow the word 'in' as I do here, you find a development of an idea. Humanity is divided between Gentile and Jew in the beginning, with hostility between them. The Gentile is 'in the flesh.' The Jew is also 'in the flesh.' The

Gentile is 'in the world' and separate from Israel. That is the old humanity's primary place of identification apart from Jesus. The old humanity is in the flesh and in the world. That is where we once lived. But look at what happens with Jesus. "14 For he is our peace, who has made the two one and has destroyed the dividing wall of hostility **in his body** 15 by abolishing the law of commandments and ordinances that of the two he might create **in himself** one new humanity so making peace, 16 reconciling the two **in one body** to God through the cross bringing the hostility to an end **in it [his body]**. 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 sojourners but you are fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God 20 having been built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets (Jesus Christ himself being the chief cornerstone 21 **in whom** the whole structure is joined together) and growing into a holy temple **in the Lord** 22 into which you are also built for a dwelling place of God **in the Spirit.**" Now we are in Jesus, in his body, in his body with no division because how could a division exist in Jesus, in one Spirit, in the Lord. What a major shift! The new humanity's primary place of identification is in Jesus.

Separated Communities: Jew & Gentile

Here in Ephesians, we see why that is. On the outer points of the chiasm, Paul talks about Jew and Gentile. Let's say you on the right are Jewish. Let's say you on the left are Gentiles. Jews and Gentiles normally hated each other. Jewish midwives didn't help Gentile women give birth, because to do so was to help bring another Gentile into the world. So they would often just let the Gentile women die in childbirth if they could. Gentiles hated Jews and mocked them for being strange and aloof. In places of worship like the Temple in Jerusalem, the Gentiles couldn't get very close. But when Jews and Gentiles came to Jesus, they came into Jesus, and then that Jewish person became something more than Jewish, and that Gentile person became something more than Gentile, so that their Jewishness and Gentileness decreased, and their core identity became something new. The early Christians thought of themselves as a new race, a third race, something that was not simply Jew and not simply Gentile, but something totally new.

That's still relevant. Let me tell you about a student conference, similar to this one. Since a business trip I took to Israel in 1998, I've been on the email prayer list of a ministry called Musalaha, which is a Christian community in Israel bringing reconciliation between Palestinians, Arabs, and Israelis. In 2004, they had a leadership conference. Every evening, people shared their stories of their lives and their faith. Israeli participants told about how they came to know Jesus as their Messiah and faced great adversity to their newfound faith. Young men from Ramallah, a West Bank Palestinian town, spoke of their dreams for further education and of their difficulties encouraging Palestinian teenagers whose lives had been reduced at best to restricted movement and boredom and at worst danger and death. One young woman, S. shared the experience of having her family home in Bethlehem occupied by Israeli troops while she and her family were forced to remain in one room for five days. What was remarkable was the fact that she had lost none of her 'bubbly' personality and radiated joy wherever she went. S. indicated that this conference was her first time to meet Jewish people besides the soldiers she encountered, and that her perceptions of Israelis had begun to change. The last day was set aside for a trip to the ancient city of Ephesus. In the ruins of an old Byzantine building, one staff person shared from this passage about the challenge of Jesus' followers becoming "one new humanity." Quietly, the group separated into pairs. One Palestinian Christian and one Israeli Messianic believer wandered together among ruins, sharing and praying together. It was a picture of a new humanity walking in the rubble of the old. On the final evening, the group worshiped as always together in Hebrew and Arabic. The writer says, "The tenderness that had developed through the week was now obvious and we began to pray and weep over one another in our goodbyes. As an act of love and unity, an Arab Christian from the Galilee asked permission to wash the feet of a young Israeli believer. As we witnessed this unique act of servant hood our hearts broke and God's Spirit moved upon us, and love replaced the fears and tensions that had kept us apart." This is just one picture of what it means for Jesus' new humanity to stand reconciled and united across their cultural differences in the rubble of the old hatreds that kept them apart. Jesus was uniting them.

What did it mean for Christians to be one in Christ? Take your fist and hit yourself in the head. Isn't that a ridiculous thing to do? Yet that's what it's like for one part of the body to sin against Christ and against another part of the body. I know that it's not always easy to face up to an existing conflict, or understand it even when you're in one, and whether it's a distant conflict or an in-your-face conflict, we need to

The Basis for Reconciliation: Jesus Tears Down Dividing Walls

So we've seen that Jesus brings about reconciliation. How does he do that? What is it that happens? On either side of the main center point, Paul talks about a dividing wall of hostility being torn down by Jesus. In v.14, 'For he is our peace, who has made the two one and has destroyed the dividing wall of hostility in his body.' And on the opposite side of the chiasm, v.16, 'so making peace, reconciling the two in one body to God through the cross bringing the hostility to an end in it.' Jesus both makes peace and he is our peace.

In this passage, Paul is referring to the 3 or 4 foot high wall in the Jerusalem Temple that separated it into two sections, separating the outer court of the Gentiles from the inner court where only the Jews were permitted. On that wall hung a sign to warn the Gentiles not to cross the wall. It was a death threat. In fact, in 1871, archaeologists, digging around the temple site in Jerusalem, uncovered the very stone marked with this warning. These were the actual words, translated from both the Hebrew and the Greek: 'No man of another race is to proceed within the partition and enclosing wall about the sanctuary. Any one arrested there will have himself to blame for the penalty of death which will be imposed as a consequence.'

We all create walls between ourselves and others. Sometimes they are visible, and sometimes they are invisible. But they are equally real, and we know it when we run into an invisible one that someone else has set up. Walls symbolize and substantiate the hostilities between people. Whenever you and I get mad at someone else, there is a very human tendency to think that God is on our side. We become 'holier-than-thou.' That is the spiritual nature of conflict. What Jesus does is that he becomes that wall of hostility that we set up, and he takes it down with him in his death. Paul says here that Jesus became that dividing wall of hostility, and then took it down at the cross. We usually think of Jesus wiping clean what we don't like about ourselves. But in this passage, Paul reminds us that Jesus wipes clean what we don't like about others, too. He somehow took it into his body and when he died, it died too.

Illus: There was one summer when a friend of mine and I were hanging out at a Vietnamese noodle house. He asked me how I was doing, and I said, 'Good; I'm starting to get to know this girl.' As I described her, my friend got a worried look on his face. He said to me, 'Uh...What do you think about two friends liking the same girl?' I thought, 'Oh no.' How many of you have been in a love-triangle situation? (How many of you are currently IN a love-triangle situation???) Well, I always want to make practical applications, so here's one example. I walked away from that conversation with a sinking feeling in my stomach, and I'm sure my friend did, too. My prayer that night was, 'Father, if someone has to get disappointed in this situation, I pray that it would be for the right reasons, and not for the wrong ones. Father, let there be no hostile feelings, no suspicions between me and my friend, no dishonesty, and above all, let there be no gossip. You HAVE GOT TO BE feeding us good things – Your Spirit – so that we don't internalize jealousy, insecurity, anger.' Now there were some tense moments, like the time I was at her place hanging out and my friend stopped by. We liked to go ballroom dancing, so that was always something we had to think about in advance because we had many friends in common. Eventually our other friends found out about this because we didn't lie about it either. That situation lasted for five long months. Basically my friend felt that there weren't enough things in common he had with the woman, so he called me to tell me that. Later, when she and I started dating, he was the first person to say that he was happy for us. In fact, he and I became better friends than before. In fact, he later gave me a car!! As a result of the Spirit of God being involved, there was no dishonesty, no bad feelings, and most importantly, there had been no gossip.

And when people come to Jesus, they become a part of Jesus himself. That's the nature of the 'in Jesus' language. Jesus came to create a reconciling community. That is why Christians have to be people of forgiveness and reconciliation and social justice in the world in general, but especially within the Christian community. For if we are not, we are allowing divisions and walls to be built up in Jesus, yet how could Jesus himself be divided? If you are not fundamentally a person of forgiveness and unity, then you are not truly 'in Jesus' and you need to reevaluate yourself and make that commitment real.

Did it mean that they all worshiped together? No. How could you logistically do that? Did it mean that there was no ethnic-specific ministry? No. Paul went to the Gentiles. Peter went to the Jews. So ethnic-specific ministry still had a place in the bigger multi-ethnic context. It meant that they became part of a transnational reconciliation movement gathered around Jesus' lordship.

Let's look back at two issues the church faced: war and money. Because the church was trans-national, when Roman soldiers became Christians, they were challenged to reject war. For how can a Christian who loves the world as Jesus loves the world, and seeks one reconciled community under Christ, fall into war between one nation and another? Jesus said, 'Love your enemy.' There's a bumper sticker that says, 'When Jesus said love your enemy, he probably meant don't kill them.' The third century writer Origen wrote that "...we no longer take sword against a nation, nor do we learn any more to make war, having become sons of peace for the sake of Jesus, who is our commander." The late second century writer Tertullian said: "Christ in disarming Peter ungirt every soldier." There were soldiers in the early church, but these soldiers were required to be non-participants in war. If they were officers conducting warfare, they were required to resign (Dale W. Brown, "Pacifism" in *New Dictionary of Christian Ethics & Pastoral Theology*, p. 645). What this means for you: ethnocentrism, nationalism, patriotism, and all political allegiances, all of these constructed communities have to be reevaluated in a new light and put at a distance because of Jesus.

What about money? Christians gave to other Christians anywhere in the world where there was need. When you tithe, do you tithe to the local church or the global church? Can you imagine what the world would be like if Christians in America made our money and our skills available to Christians in other countries? Look at what Paul was doing. In 2 Corinthians 8-9, he shares about that. 'Paul does not think in terms of local congregations giving only to their own local church. Instead, he surveys the entire worldwide body of Christ and encourages money to be given where it is needed the most. For example, he looked at the famine victims in Judea and collected money from Turkey and Greece for them. His primary concern is to work toward relative, not absolute, financial equality among all Christians. For Paul, need outweighs proximity. It also outweighs ethnicity and personal acquaintance, for Paul is telling a group of Greek Christians to sacrifice for the sake of Jewish Christians whom they have presumably never met. If we were to follow these principles in our giving to the church, the results would be amazing. For example, many churches now teach that members should give 10% of their paychecks to the local church. These churches may send a token portion away for missions, etc. but spend the majority on their own congregation. So you get wealthy congregations with opulent buildings and others struggling to pay a pastor. It's a more extreme form of the public school funding problem. Because public schools are funded by local property taxes, rich neighborhoods have really good schools and poor neighborhoods have really bad schools. The New Testament stands against that. So the practice of tithing in its current form is not biblical.

Who are you? How do you identify yourself? Jesus is asking us to make his worldwide church our primary group reference, above our ethnicity, above our nationality, above whatever privileges and prejudices and anger and hostility come with those old ways of identifying ourselves. That's how Jesus produces reconciliation.

I believe that one of the biggest mistakes of the Protestant tradition, particularly in the Reformed and Lutheran traditions, is to emphasize the local church, the local church, the local church. For those of you who don't know the Protestant tradition, there is the 'local church' and the 'universal church.' Protestants spend all our time, it seems, talking about how the local church should be run, how spiritual gifts should be used in the local church, how to celebrate communion at the local church. Those are all fine subjects to talk about. But what about 'the universal church'? Protestants don't think that much about that.

As a result, when Protestant Christians spread, they produced the most racist, separatist churches around. Look at the Dutch Reformed church. They set up Apartheid in South Africa. Look at the British Anglican church. They did nothing to counteract the injustice of the British Empire, until much later. Look at Protestant America. Look at what White Protestants did to native Americans, African Americans: land seizure, genocide, slavery, and segregation. All of this came from Luther and Calvin and others. How could America be racist, own slaves, and go through civil war, even though people were mostly Christian on both sides? Because it was Protestant. Why did middle class White American Christians leave behind minorities in the city and relocate into the suburbs during the 50's and 60's? Because they were Protestant.

But thankfully there were exceptions. During the summer between my junior and senior year, I went home from school and I was totally fired up to share Jesus with my parents. I remember one night talking with my dad about Jesus. I asked him what he thought about Jesus. And he said, "I don't know much about Jesus, but I have opinions about Christians. Where were the Christians in 1942, when my family and I and

110,000 Japanese Americans were sent to internment camps during World War II? Where were the Christians when we were restarting our hotel business from scratch on Skid Row? Where were they? Weren't they just siding with White America?" And I was stuck. I didn't have an answer for that.

But it's only recently that I do. I did some research into this topic, and I found that some Christians (the real Christians) who did not. Church leaders from both White and Black communities maintained their unity with the Japanese American Christians. They voiced their support for the Japanese American community generally and against the Executive Order. Let me highlight two people. Emery Andrews, a Baptist pastor of a Japanese American congregation in Seattle, moved himself and his family to Idaho as his congregation was interned in the Minidoka, Idaho camp. He actually tried to move inside the camp, but the military didn't let them. Andrews brought goods out of storage to the internees, and helped drive cars out to families who had settled in New Jersey. During one year, Andrews traveled 42,356 miles - through the mountains and deserts across the country in the days before interstate highways. Emery Andrews maintained the unity of the body of Christ through social justice.

Floyd Schmoe, a Christian in the Quaker Friends Church, was a biology professor at the University of Washington and gave that up. He quit his job to coordinate assistance work for the internees. He had already spoken up in May of 1941 against looming racist attacks on Japanese Americans in the event of war. In early 1942 he spoke at campus meetings against Executive Order 9066. As he later recalled, "When all this failed we organized ways of easing the blow upon our neighbors by helping to arrange the safe storage of their possessions, leasing of their lands, businesses, hotels, etc." He also organized care for elderly Japanese Americans left behind in hospitals. And he worked with the resettlement program to help Japanese Americans leave the camps. When Floyd was challenged by racist opponents or reporters with the question, "Yes, but what would you do if your daughter married a Japanese?" he answered, "She did." Floyd Schmoe maintained the unity of the body of Christ through social justice.

Partly as a result of encouragement like this, more Japanese Americans committed themselves to Jesus Christ during the internment than at any other point in history. Because of this, I'm encouraged!!! Blown away!!! It is clear that Jesus was in these Christians. I'm praying about how and when to mail my dad a 15 page essay summarizing these things.

Why care about social justice? Why care about the body of Christ broadly? Because you care about evangelism. Paul says in v.19 - 22 that the body of Christ is God's new Temple. That means that when people want to learn about God, they don't go to the old Temple in Jerusalem anymore. They come to the church and they look at the quality of relationships that people have. That's why social justice and evangelism go together. Part of the reason why some of you have not cared about social justice before is because you only want to evangelize rich people in the suburbs. Do you need to care about social justice in order to reach rich people? No. But if you care about reaching all people for Jesus, even if it's not you per se but other Christians doing that, then you'll care about social justice, because most people in the world are poor, or oppressed by someone else, or both. And you'll see why Jesus evangelizes people into a social justice posture. You'll see why Jesus said in Luke 4, 'I have come to preach the gospel to the poor.' He draws us into his kingdom community, because he is uniting us all under his lordship.

The Twentieth Century

Really? What about the wars in the name of religion? What about the Crusades and the Inquisition?

But in the process of trying to understand how to bring about justice, I had also been doing a lot of reading about social change. And when you do that, you start to notice that there have been lots of incidences when Christians organized themselves and others to protest injustice. For example, twentieth century non-violent resistance movements that were Christian in character. In Russia, Leo Tolstoy and some other Russian Orthodox Christians led a non-violent peasant movement against the Russian nobles who were corrupt and oppressive. Tolstoy based this on Jesus' teaching to love your enemy and be a reconciling force in the world. His writings became world-famous and led to other movements. The Korean Independence Movement in 1900's was led by Christians; 50% of the signers of the Korean Declaration of Independence were Christians, even though only 1% of the total population of Korea was Christian at the time. Christians led peaceful marches and were sometimes massacred by Imperial Japan, but they held on. Gandhi's non-violent resistance in South Africa and India was strongly influenced by Tolstoy and therefore Jesus. He

knew he couldn't draw that much on the Bhagavad-Gita because the Hindu caste system legitimates war; the warriors have their own caste, right underneath the Brahmins. Then in the U.S., the Civil Rights Movement was led by the black church. Martin Luther King, Jr. said that if you wanted to be a part of the Civil Rights Movement, you had to agree to reflect on the life and teachings of Jesus every day. He knew that their boycotts and marches, which were very well organized, would demand spiritual and emotional resolve that could only be cultivated by regular contact with Jesus. Then in the Philippines, the Catholic believers led a 'bloodless revolution' that overthrew Ferdinand Marcos. They stood in the streets of Manila while Marcos' tanks and soldiers were coming. They put flowers into gun nozzles. The army couldn't fire on these people, so Marcos fled the country and Cory Aquino, a Catholic, became the first woman President of the Philippines. Then in the late 80's, a Catholic movement in Poland called Solidarity led the way to overthrowing the Soviets. How could it do that? Because Poland was 95% Catholic, and Polish resistance was organized in and through the Catholic Church, because the Church was the only institution not controlled by the Soviets. So the priests printed newsletters, handed out journals, and did heroic acts. Then in Eastern Europe, a series of non-violent 'velvet revolutions' were triggered by students who had organized themselves to pray in strategic public places to prevent the corrupt government from arresting certain people unjustly. All of these things required certain levels of Christians organizing themselves. I found myself very impressed by this whole sequence of events.

In fact, the twentieth century was really disturbing for atheists. Why? On the one hand, because people have always claimed that the reason for war is organized religion, specifically Christianity. But the 20th century had more war-related deaths than the previous 20 centuries combined, and organized religion had nothing to do with it. What was the real cause of all 108 million deaths? Organized atheism. Atheism and secularism form nation-states, and the 20th century was the era of nation-building. It started with the Turkish genocide of the Armenians in 1914. Then it was colonialism and World War I. Then it was the Holocaust, then Stalin's purges, then Mao's Cultural Revolution, then the Khmer Rouge in Cambodia. On and on the list goes. What form of organization serves nothing larger than itself? Nations.

In fact, if you look back through European history with the lens of the 20th century, you get a better view. The Crusades and the Inquisition were really exercises in Europe's early nation-building phase. The Crusades were just like secular colonialism and the fight for land. It was nation-building facing outward. The Inquisition was just like ethnic cleansing and the fight for national cohesion. It was nation-building facing inward. So even though Christians were involved and they certainly made mistakes, and we certainly need to be apologetic about that, the real structural cause of the Crusades and the Inquisition was the same as that of the 20th century: nation-building. It's important to distinguish between correlations and causes. So if you get upset about the Crusades and the Inquisition, you ought to be 20 times more upset by nation-building, the great Enlightenment modernist project. If you're upset about Christianity, you ought to be 20 times more upset by atheism. Yes, organized religion made some mistakes, but organized atheism totally sucked.

And this does have implications for how we handle power. When you're in the corporate world and are getting caught up in corporate politics, you've got to be a voice for reconciliation in Christ. Even if it costs you that promotion. You can't just be a player in that world. When you're in the world of scientific research and are getting caught up in the politics of funding and backstabbing, you've got to be a voice for reconciliation in Christ. Even if it costs you that paper. When you're in the world of public office or the school board, you've got to be a voice for reconciliation in Christ. I suspect this is why Barbara Lee, Congresswoman from Oakland, CA voted against giving war power to President Bush in Afghanistan after 9/11. She thought we needed to approach this by other means. This is why President Jimmy Carter tried so hard to bring peace in the Middle East. He tried to get Americans to consume less, because it was a social justice and reconciliation issue with the rest of the world. He was right, and it cost him the Presidency. Ronald Reagan came in and ushered in the decade of greed.

So YES, Christianity has worked. Jesus has demonstrated his lordship, his ability to unite our fragmented humanity and bring reconciliation in one body. Social justice and evangelism are therefore part of reconciliation with God and with each other in Christ.

I have three questions I want to leave you with:

1. Where is your sense of corporate identity? We are never just individuals. Is it being an 'American'? Or something else? Your family?
2. What is your sense of corporate mission? Family preservation?
3. What can you do now to take a step towards anyone you're in conflict with?