

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

### **Reconciliation in Christ** *Ephesians 2:14 – 16*

#### **Introduction: Patrick**

Reconciliation is probably one of the most pressing needs of our day. I'm willing to bet that every one of us senses that. Whether in our friendships, in our families, or in the world, we need reconciliation. In the last few months, I have seen my sister and my mom speak to each other after not speaking to each other for almost 2 years. They are starting the long journey of being reconciled. Some of you might be feeling estranged from a friend and wonder, 'How is that friendship going to be pieced back together?' Some of you might have just gotten back from New Orleans for the Katrina Relief project. And you might still be wondering, 'How will people be reconciled to each other in light of the racism and classism of this country?'

Let me tell you a story about reconciliation that inspires me. It's about a man named Patrick (I thought it only appropriate since it's St. Patrick's Day to tell the story of the actual Saint Patrick). Patrick was born in Scotland in about the year 385. He was born to wealthy parents and had a carefree childhood, but that was all shattered when he was kidnapped by Irish raiders and sold as a slave in Ireland. There, he was forced to work as a slave on a farm, herding sheep among a very superstitious, warlike culture. Many times, he was forced out into the bitter snow, ice, and rain. For six years he endured this slavery. It was enough to make any man as cold and bitter as the winter around him. But instead, Patrick found warmth and healing. He thought often of Jesus, remembering the childhood prayers that his parents taught him. He later wrote, 'The love of God and his fear grew in me more and more, as did the faith, and my soul was rosed, so that, in a single day, I have said as many as a hundred prayers and in the night, nearly the same.' At the age of 20, he escaped to the coast and found some sailors who took him back to Britain. He was reunited with his family. But not long afterwards, Patrick had a dream where the people of Ireland called out to him, 'We beg you, holy youth, to come and walk among us once more.' Patrick knew that this was a dream from God, telling him to go share Jesus with the Irish, the very people who had enslaved him. So he asked Jesus to help him forgive his former captors, and Jesus did. Patrick studied the Bible under a Christian bishop and teacher named Germanus. When he had finished, he returned to Ireland on March 25, 433. There, he began a forty year saga where he lived in poverty and expected every day to be killed or enslaved again. But he preached Jesus, loved people in the power of Jesus, saw Jesus do miracles through him, and saw almost the whole of Ireland come to Jesus. He had been fully reconciled with the people he had once hated. He died on this very day, March 17, in 461.

#### **Relevance**

How did Patrick forgive the people he had been enslaved by for 6 years? How did he forgive the people who took away his youth and made him grow up fast? It's because he gave his life to Jesus, and Jesus did something very mysterious and profound in him, and then he made Patrick an agent of reconciliation: Reconciliation on the human level that flowed out of reconciliation with God. What did Jesus do in him? We're going to look at a passage from the Bible describing that. How does Jesus bring reconciliation between people? Let's look.

#### **Overview: Show Chiasm for parallelism**

The first thing to notice is that this section 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. EXPLAIN THE CHIASM.

The second thing to notice is that the poem uses community imagery. 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. Right away, I want to stress that Jesus did not come to save individuals and leave them as individuals.

Christianity is not about 'individual salvation.' It is about one new body, one new humanity, one new political community headed up by Jesus as the king.

### 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. 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. And they are defining themselves by their outward characteristics. The Jews called the Gentiles 'uncircumcised,' which was a racial and sexual slur back in the day. But the Jews called themselves 'circumcised,' which is made in the flesh by hands. In other words, the mark defining their community was outward.

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. And the defining mark of this new humanity is not outward; it's inward. It is a spiritual reality because Jesus places himself spiritually in all who believe in him.

Let me illustrate this by telling you about a student conference. 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. The retreat center was nestled in a peaceful, wooded area near the ancient city of Ephesus, an ideal setting, they said, that provided relief from the tensions that have characterized the past few years of Intifada. The group was carefully balanced between young men and women from the Palestinian Christian and the Israeli Messianic communities. So the tensions were palpable. The differences in political and cultural identity, language and mentality, coupled with the hostilities that exist between these peoples, forced them to face the challenge of biblically-based reconciliation if we were to fellowship at all.

During the evenings, the group hung out, relaxed through worship and fun activities. 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 in Jesus to stand reconciled and united with their cultural differences in the rubble of the old hatreds that kept them apart.

Illus: Let me share with you how Jesus has impacted me personally: Since my wife and I got married, we've lived in a low-income, high-crime area in Dorchester, down the red line. Our house has been broken into twice in these last 5 years. The first time our house was broken into, my laptop was stolen. But perhaps the hardest thing for me was that my wife's engagement ring was stolen – the very ring that my grandfather had given to my grandmother; she had given it to me because I'm the only son of an only son. You also should know that I can be very materialistic, so it was an internal struggle. One of the people I suspected of committing this crime was a teenage young man from right next door. He had been to juvie lock-up twice, had gotten kicked off the high school basketball team for using drugs, and had generally not been interested in relationship with us. But in 2004, this young man committed his life to Jesus, cleaned up his act, and said to me, "Do you have any extra room in your house? I think it would be good for me to live with you all." I struggled with that a little bit. I said, "But Lord, I think he's one of the kids who robbed our house!!!" But Jesus said, "I have a great deal of love for him, and I'd like to love him through you." So my wife and I invited him to live in one room in our house, and God has blessed it.

### **A Reconciliation Movement? Really?**

Really? What about the wars in the name of religion? What about the Crusades and the Inquisition? That's a good point. 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. 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 of 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.

### **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. Often, there is a kind of peace that sets in after you kill a mediator who tried to reconcile you. It's like the Montagues and the Capulets, stunned after Romeo and Juliet die. That kind of death often becomes the basis for real peace. Jesus was the best man who ever lived, God in the flesh, and yet both Jews and Gentiles killed him as a pawn in their hatred of each other. That's true in a sense here. But there's a deeper reason.

Jesus tears down the dividing wall of hostility and makes two into one. 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. 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.'

But Paul says here that Jesus became that dividing wall of hostility, and then took it down. He somehow took it into his body. 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.' Even if we don't have much spiritual background, we see things in such a way that 'fate will vindicate us' or 'time will tell' in our favor. 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.

In the case of the great Temple in Jerusalem, it's especially poignant because this was historically true and not just a psychological construct. The Temple was the *old* meeting place between the one true God and humanity. But Jesus became the *new* meeting place between God and humanity. In fact, because Jesus was both God and human, he made it possible for human beings to be one with God when they join themselves to him. So Jesus not only made the Temple obsolete, he brought down the hostility between Jews and Gentiles – symbolized by this wall – because now everyone has to approach God on equal footing, through Jesus alone, and not by comparing themselves to each other because that is one of the root sources of hostility. Neither individual moral performance nor race or ethnicity can be used by people as reasons for hostility. In God's sight, those walls were leveled to the ground by Jesus.

Illus: My friend EM had a hard time in her relationship with her dad. There was no good communication at home, so her feelings were always stifled and bottled up. She didn't live up to her parents' expectations for a young scholar, so she was always criticized for being slow. Her dad took a lot of his anger out on her because his patience wore thin. When her parents started arguing about divorce, she was in 6th grade. She took sides with her mom, which made things worse between her and Dad. When her older brother went to college, this left her at home, and on at least one occasion during that time, he hit her. Dad would also become drunk at times, and was particularly scary during those episodes. She kept a big kitchen knife in her dresser drawer, just in case she had to defend herself. That was how much she hated and feared her father. If anyone had a right to be permanently angry, to dishonor her father, to never speak to him again, it's her. And she struggled with forgiving him and found she couldn't do it without Jesus. But she knows that God only accepts her through Jesus. It doesn't matter if she's a 'better person.' And in that sense, before God, she and her dad are in the same place. She found that Jesus will empower her to forgive him through her since he is the ultimately forgiving one. Jesus has brought her so much healing over time. In fact, now she's the one to remind her brother about their dad's birthday. That is the transformation that Jesus brings.

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 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.

What does that mean for us as Christians now when the U.S. is at war? Let's look back then. Because the church was trans-national, when Roman soldiers became Christians, they were challenged to reevaluate war between nation and nation. For how can a Christian who represents a new trans-national community, simply fall right back into the political conflicts and structures of the old humanity? 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 things have to be reevaluated in a new light and put at a distance because of Jesus. There is one new humanity, and it's a real community. It's just as real internationally to you as it is within this fellowship! If it does not impact the world scene, then Jesus' new humanity is not really being one body. 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.

Think about the impact of Patrick in Ireland. Not only did he become one of the greatest figures of Irish history, despite not being Irish, he continued Jesus' reconciliation movement there. So when Rome fell to the Germanic invaders, and all the libraries in Western Europe were burned, the only copies of Plato and Homer and all the Greeks were in Ireland, because Irish Christian scholars collected the written works of Europe, in spite of the fact that the rest of Europe scorned the Irish. When Irish Christians came out to re-

establish the Christian faith, they carried with them the lost literary heritage of Europe. They gave it back as God's gift, the fruit of reconciliation forged by Jesus. So Thomas Cahill writes in the book, *How the Irish Saved Civilization*. It could be titled just as easily, *How Jesus Saved the Irish and then Saved European Literature*.