

# One New Man in Christ

Ephesians 2:11-22

Preached by Pastor Jason Tarn to HCC on January 14, 2024

## Introduction

- ❖ For those fairly new to our church, it's important for you to know that the sermons you've heard lately are not your typical sermons at HCC. Now they are typical in that they're all based in the Bible and aimed at highlighting the gospel or our gospel mission. But they're atypical in that they've been focused on a particular topic or theme.
  - **Normally, we just preach through books of the Bible.** Last year we preached through 1 Corinthians and a chunk of Genesis. For the first half of this year, the plan is to preach through Nehemiah and Galatians. **Preaching chapter by chapter through books of the Bible is the steady diet you'll get from this pulpit.** And we try to go back and forth between the Old and New Testament and try to preach different genres. We want you to hear God's Word with all of its variety and diversity.
  
- ❖ **But every so often, it's good to zero in on a particular topic, especially when the occasion is fitting.** For example, every year – on what's recognize as Sanctity of Life Sunday – we usually preach a sermon that emphasizes the sanctity of human life in the natural span from conception to death. Sanctity of Life Sunday is scheduled on the Sunday closest to the anniversary of the Roe v Wade decision handed down on January 22, 1973. So next Sunday, we'll observe the occasion and Pastor Henry is preparing a Sanctity of Life message.
  - Well, the weekend before Sanctity of Life Sunday is usually the long weekend where we observe Martin Luther King Day. And what we've done a few times in the past – and what I hope to do more often in the future – is **to observe the Sunday before MLK Day as Ethnic Harmony Sunday and to preach about how the gospel calls us to pursue ethnic harmony in our personal lives and in our life together as the church.** And how the gospel is the very power that makes that harmony possible.
  
- ❖ **Sixty-four years ago, in a *Meet the Press* [interview](#), Martin Luther King famously pointed out that 11:00am Sunday morning is the most racially-segregated hour in America.** Now some are going to look at us and accuse a Chinese heritage church like ours of contributing to that problem. Six decades later and we're still segregating the church.
  - But to assume that we're all the same here is way too simplistic. **First of all, that unfairly discounts the presence of many worshippers here who would not be racially-classified as Asian.** We shouldn't ignore the non-Asians in this congregation. That's not respectful. They should be seen and their presence valued.
  
- ❖ **Secondly, the focus on racial-segregation and the use of race as a category is not helpful.** For one, it's not a biblical category. The Bible speaks of one human race distinguished by different ethnicities. Different *ethnoi*. The Greek word is usually translated as *nations* in your English Bible (Acts 17:26). **The point is that your ethnic identity is God-ordained.** He's the one who caused you to be born within a particular ethnic people group.
  - **But race is a man-made classification that puts people in categories based on differences in physical traits.** Traditionally, the focus has been on skin tone, hair texture, facial features, or other physical traits. But that's way too generalized.

- ❖ On a superficial level, Chinese, Koreans, Japanese, Vietnamese, and Filipinos share similar physical traits. Lumping us together and calling us “Asians” might be convenient for sociologists. But you gloss over the rich heritage and cultural distinctiveness of each ethnic group. **Just because you have a room of people who look the same, that doesn’t mean you’re dealing with a homogenous group.** That overlooks the ethnic differences among us.
- ❖ But having said all that, I do want to acknowledge that MLK’s statement about racial-segregation in the church is not insignificant today. **Even though race is not a biblical category like ethnicity, the reality is that race is still a significant factor in our lived experience.** We may not live in a racist society like MLK did sixty years ago, but we do live in what some would describe as a racialized society (see *Divided By Faith* by Emerson & Smith). Which means the color of your skin still makes a difference in your lived experience. **Being black, brown, or yellow is still consequential to how you’re perceived and treated in a society that is predominately and historically white.** Look, we should acknowledge how far we’ve come as a society since the 60s. But we still have a ways to go.
  - I love how, in that same interview, MLK acknowledged that his church is predominately black. So technically, it’s racially-segregated. **But he says that, while they are a segregated church, they’re not a segregating church.** Meaning that they gladly welcome their white brothers and sisters to worship with them. It wasn’t the case the other way around. So a church could be segregated for various factors or circumstances, but at its heart (in its spirit) it must *not* be segregating.
- ❖ I find that so helpful for us. Look, I’ll always push back anytime someone tries to suggest that a Chinese heritage church like ours is homogenous and lacking in diversity. We are a diverse church if you’re willing to broaden your definition of diversity beyond just race. **But I acknowledge that, if using a racial category, then our church is predominately Asian.** Technically, we are an Asian church as much as MLK’s was a Black church. **But in the same way, we must never be a segregating church.**
  - We should be sensitive to any possible ways in which non-Asians might be alienated or unwelcomed here. And be willing to lower any of those barriers. **We want to make sure that no matter what you look like – no matter your skin tone – that you feel welcomed here and accepted in this church.** We must never be a segregating church.
- ❖ This is where our text is so helpful. **Because Ephesians 2:11-22 points to the problem and solution for all the ungodly segregation and alienation experienced in society and in churches.** I’ve broken it down to three sections:
  - (1) We’ll consider the **problem**, namely an alienated humanity. (2) We’ll look at God’s **answer**, which is to create a united new humanity. And 3) we’ll ask how did God achieve his answer? And we’ll see the **solution** lies in a bloody cross.

## Problem: An Alienated Humanity

- ❖ Here in our passage, Paul is confronting humanity's greatest problem, which can be summed up in one word: alienation. **In our natural state, human beings are alienated from God and from one another.** And a perfect microcosm of this universal problem can be found in the first-century hostility that existed between Jews and Gentiles.
  - **To the first-century Jew, Gentiles (non-Jews) were considered unclean – not just spiritually – but morally and socially.** Jews wanted no association with Gentiles lest they risk becoming unclean. That made it easy to resort to derogatory names, calling them “Gentile dogs” or, as we see in v11, “*the uncircumcised.*” That’s how you label the Gentile as “other” – as not just different than you but *lesser* than you.
  
- ❖ **Now on the flip side, Gentiles despised Jews for despising them.** For not getting with the program and assimilating into Greco-Roman society. For insisting to be separate and not joining Gentiles in their pagan practices.
  - **This mutual hostility between Jew and Gentile was not just in spirit. It was fixed in stone.** Literally. Notice in v14 where Paul makes reference to a “*dividing wall of hostility.*” Commentators think that he most likely had in mind a particular feature found on the temple grounds in Jerusalem.
  
- ❖ Picture it this way. **Imagine yourself as a little first-century bird resting on the top of Herod’s temple.** The first thing you’d notice is that the temple itself was situated high on a mount and surrounded by three courts. Immediately surrounding the temple was the **Court of Priests**, which was only accessible to men of the tribe of Levi. Around that was the **Court of Israel**, open to all other Jewish men. You fly over these two courts and land on top of the Gate of Nicanor, and it opens up to a third court, the **Court of Women**, which was as far inside the temple grounds a Jewish woman could get.
  - Then you if keep flying outwards, you’ll reach the outer wall of the temple complex. It’s a large wall. Keep flying and you see a set of stairs descending to the bottom of the Temple Mount. And you’ll reach another wall. And on the far side of this stone wall, you see a large area called the **Court of Gentiles**. And as you’re sitting on this stone wall – which was about 5-feet tall – you’ll notice signs, carved in Greek and Latin, with a warning against trespassing.
    - Archeologists unearthed one of these signs in 1871. It’s in a museum in Istanbul. It’s carved into white limestone and says, “*No foreigner may enter within the barrier and enclosure round the temple. Anyone who is caught doing so will have himself to blame for his ensuing death.*”
  
- ❖ That stone wall is the dividing wall of hostility that Paul had in mind. That’s why we’re saying the alienation between Jew and Gentile was fixed in stone. **There was a constant, visible reminder for Gentiles that they were far off from God and God’s people.** Paul says it this way in v12, “*remember that you were at that time (referring to the pre-conversion days of his Gentile readers) separate from Christ, alienated from the commonwealth of Israel and strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world.*”

- ❖ **The mention of Gentiles being alienated from Israel and strangers to the covenants suggests that, besides the literal stone wall, there's a metaphorical wall dividing them – the Law.** Look how it says in vv14-15 that Jesus broke down “*in his flesh the dividing wall of hostility* <sup>15</sup>*by abolishing the law of commandments expressed in ordinances.*” So that 5-foot stone wall around the temple is only a representation of the real wall – the real barrier – that was keeping Gentiles from Jews and from God. It's the Mosaic Law.
  - Particularly the ceremonial aspects of the Law: the circumcision of males, the food restrictions, the cleanliness rules. If you fail to keep these laws you're considered unclean, and any contact with unclean people makes *you* unclean. **So you can see how the Law created a significant social barrier between Jews and Gentiles.**
  
- ❖ So is it the Law's fault? Do we blame the Law of God? No, it's not the Law's fault. **The Law is a good gift from God.** It showed Israel how, through obedience, they could live under God's blessings and avoid his curses. And as they experienced his blessings, they were to turn around and be a blessing to all the nations of the earth (Gen 12:1-3).
  - But Israel failed in this task. They knew the Gentiles were alienated from God and without hope because they were “*strangers to the covenants of promise.*” They didn't have the Law *of* God that brings blessing *from* God. That should've evoked their sympathy and compassion. **But instead of being a reason to bless the Gentiles, Israel's possession of the Law became a reason to boast over them.** The Law – meant to be a gift and blessing – became a source of pride and division.
  
- ❖ **Now as we said, this hostility between these two particular groups is not unique to them. It's representative of a much larger, universal human problem.** It's a sin problem. Sin is what leads us to take God's gifts and – instead of using them to bless – we use them to build walls that divide. Think about it. He gives us, for example, **a particular ethnicity.** And we come to value our ethnic heritage. He ordains for us to grow up with **a particular nationality** that we come to appreciate. So I'm Chinese by ethnicity. I'm American by nationality. I'm proud of being both. I'm grateful for these gifts from God.
  - And he wants me to take these blessings and use them to bless others. How can my Chinese heritage or my privilege as an American be leveraged to serve the gospel, to advance God's kingdom, to bless others? That's how we should be thinking.
  
- ❖ But then sin is there in the human heart. And it leads us to distort God's gifts. Where good things become ultimate things. **Where we try to derive an identity – a sense of worth and significance – out of gifts like our ethnicity or nationality.** We take something good about our ethnic or national heritage, and we elevate it to make us feel superior to those who are different. This is how you end up with racism or nationalism.
  - Here's an example. **Let's say I've been instilled with a strong work ethic because of my Chinese American heritage.** Especially with my parents being first-generation immigrants who worked extremely hard to make a life for their family in this country.

- ❖ But ultimately that work ethic comes from God who ordained which family I'd grow up in. **But instead of using his gift to bless others, what if I carve an identity out of being a diligent, hard worker?** What if I elevate that work ethic to the point that it defines me? Where I start to think I have these blessings in my life because I worked so hard for it.
  - **That leads me to put up walls and alienate myself from other ethnic groups that stereotypically don't share the same work ethic.** And I start to view individuals through broad generalizations. Which gives me little sympathy for someone facing hardship if I don't think they're working hard enough to improve their situation. I can easily ignore systemic injustices and assume their troubles stem from a poor work ethic. If Chinese Americans can improve their own situations, why can't they?
    - Do you see how easy it is for us to put up dividing walls? It's not just a first-century Jewish problem. **We do the same whenever we take God's good gifts and blessings and use them to lift ourselves up while putting others down.** Which results in an alienated, separated, divided humanity.

### **Answer: A United New Humanity**

- ❖ So what's God's answer to this universal human dilemma? That leads to our second point. **We see that God's answer to the problem of an alienated humanity is to create a united new humanity.** That's what Paul teaches. He says in v15 that God's answer is to "*create in himself one new man in place of the two, so making peace*".
  - **Apparently the rift between Jew and Gentile is so deep that the only way for God to make peace was to make a new creation, a new entity, a new humanity.** The plan was not to turn Gentiles into Jews or Jews into Gentiles. It wasn't even to blend the two together. No, God's plan was to address the alienation; to bridge the divide; to make peace between Jew and Gentile by making the two into a new person.
- ❖ **If Jews saw the world in two categories, Jews and Gentiles, then Paul saw the world in three: Jews, Gentiles, and the Church.** The Church is comprised of any Jew or Gentile who has been born again, of the Spirit, into a new humanity bound by a unity that runs thicker than blood. We don't lose our blood ties between members of the same family or ethnicity. But those ties have been superseded by our spiritual ties as those who share one Spirit.
- ❖ Later in vv19-22, Paul builds on this idea of God creating a new humanity with three metaphors. **First, he applies the metaphor of citizenship in God's kingdom.** Paul valued his citizenship in God's kingdom even more than his Roman citizenship. Which, in his day, was so highly prized. And yet Paul counted that as nothing compared to being a Christian.
  - **This is why American Christians have to remember that *Christian* is our identity. *American* is just a modifier.** Trouble comes when you get that mixed up. When you act like Christian *Americans*. It's to our shame, if we elevate country *over* Christ.
- ❖ **Second, Paul uses the family metaphor.** Christians are members of the same "*household of God*." I love my parents. But since they're not in Christ, there something profoundly missing in my relationship with them. Something that I experience with you – my spiritual family.

- ❖ **And the third metaphor Paul uses is that of the Church being the new temple of God.** In v21, he describes us as a building, founded on the teaching of the apostles and prophets, joined together by Christ our cornerstone, and growing up, “*into a holy temple in the Lord. <sup>22</sup>In him you also are being built together into a dwelling place of God by the Spirit.*” Think about that. In Christ, Gentiles who were restricted to the outer court are not only invited into the temple but to *be* the temple! To not just get closer to God – but to have God dwell in you!
- ❖ This is how Paul is trying to communicate the radical change that takes place when you become a Christian. **When you’re formed into a united new humanity where you share a profound bond of unity between diverse people of diverse backgrounds.**
  - But to be honest, for many Christians this is more a *theoretical idea* than a *felt reality*. **The kind of connection we’re talking about is something we really only experience with people like us.** Look, we all know from experience that we share an immediate connection with those who share our ethnicity. When you have a shared set of cultural experiences and values – that makes it so much easier to build community. And there’s nothing wrong with that.
- ❖ But what Ephesians 2 is describing is a new community (a new humanity) that’s based not on a shared ethnicity or culture – but on a shared faith and Spirit. **That means you can experience an even deeper connection with people very different than yourself – simply because you share the same faith and Spirit.**
  - The Afghani refugee, the Mexican migrant worker, the African American grandmother who lived through Jim Crow, or the white farmer plowing wheat in the American heartland – I don’t have much in common with any of them. **But if they’re a fellow Christian, we share the deepest of human connections.** Together, we have been born again into a new humanity in Christ. That’s a real bond.
- ❖ Brothers and sisters, this should *not* just be a theoretical idea. **This profound connection – this eternal bond of the Spirit – with someone so different than you YET so similar in Christ.** Don’t be content to simply know it by theory. Make every effort to know it by lived experience. In your personal life and in our life together as the church.
  - **This is why we sent off Ethnos Church last Sunday.** They’re intentionally pursuing a multiethnic ministry. They want to worship with believers of all sorts of ethnicities and nationalities. They want a profound experience of what it means to be a united new humanity in Christ. If that inspires you, I strongly urge you to consider joining Ethnos and taking part in their vision.
- ❖ **But maybe you feel called to be in a Chinese heritage church like HCC.** I feel the same. But there are still changes we can make in our lives – in how we spend our time or who we spend our time with – so that this united new humanity becomes, for us, a felt reality.

## Solution: A Bloody Cross

- ❖ But before you identify any changes you need to make – you first need to be willing to make a change. To find that will (that motivation), let's turn to our third point. God's answer to humanity's universal problem of alienation is to unite us into a new humanity. And his solution to achieve that new reality – is a bloody cross. **Paul explains that it's the cross of Christ that breaks down the dividing wall, and it's the cross of Christ that kills the hostility and makes peace between divided peoples.**
  
- ❖ Look at v13, *"<sup>13</sup>But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off [speaking of Gentiles] have been brought near by the blood of Christ. <sup>14</sup>For he himself is our peace, who has made us both one and has broken down in his flesh the dividing wall of hostility <sup>15</sup>by abolishing the law of commandments expressed in ordinances"*.
  - So Paul is saying that Jesus broke down the dividing wall of hostility between Jew and Gentile – by abolishing the law. And by that, recall that we said Paul was referring to the ceremonial aspects of the law.
    - **The ceremonial laws were there to teach one basic lesson: God is holy.** God is impeccably clean. And if you want to draw near to him, you have to be clean as he is clean. So the dutiful, law-abiding Jew keeps the ceremonial law and feels near to God. While his unclean Gentile neighbor is far off. Separated and alienated. That's what it says in v17.
  
- ❖ But notice something radical that Paul says there. You can easily miss it if you don't read carefully. It says Jesus, *"came and preached peace to you who were far off (Gentiles) and peace to those who were near (Jews)."* So yes, Jews were nearer to God than Gentiles. That was made clear in the architectural layout of the temple grounds.
  - But notice how it says that both Jews and Gentiles need to hear a gospel of peace. Implying that both are *not* at peace with God. **Both need to be reconciled to God and then reconciled to each other.**
  
- ❖ Think about it. If you were a circumcised Jewish man, who perfectly kept kosher and all the cleanliness rules, you could pass through the wall surrounding the Court of Gentiles. You could climb those steps and enter the Court of Women. You could pass through the Nicanor Gate and enter the Court of Israel. But unless you're a priest, that's as far as you go.
  - And unless you're of the house of Aaron, you can't enter the temple itself. And unless you're the high priest, you can't go behind the veil into the Holy of Holies where the glory of God resides. If you trespassed, you'd be struck down dead. **The point is, even for the Law-abiding Jew, there's still a dividing wall of hostility separating him from the Lord.** He can obey the Law and still not be at peace with God.
  
- ❖ And the same would apply to us. **That means even if you do the right things, you keep the right rules, you're a good person, but there's still a wall between you and God.** Sure, you're closer than the sex abuser, the hardened criminal, the international terrorist. Sure, they're further off. They're not at peace with God. But neither are you.

- ❖ There's hostility in the air. Not just between fellow man. But between God and man. Because of our sinfulness and selfishness, because of our pride and partiality – *we* should be killed. **God should kill us for our hostility towards him and towards other people or people groups. But instead he killed the hostility.**
  - Look at v16. His plan was to, "*reconcile us both to God in one body through the cross, thereby killing the hostility.*" **On the cross, Jesus bore our hostility on his shoulders and received God's hostility in our place.** He took *our* punishment. He died *our* death. And reconciled us to God. "*Through him we both have access in one Spirit to the Father.*" (v18)
  
- ❖ **This is the gospel. And until you receive it, you'll keep putting up walls.** You'll keep dividing the world into people who are like you (they're great!) and *those* people who are not like you. And you'll do it because it makes you feel good about yourself. It gives you a sense of identity or worth.
  - Look, your ethnicity is an important part of who you are. And it's not wrong to be proud of your culture. **But if your ethnicity or culture is at the core of your identity – if at the very core you see yourself as Chinese or Korean or white or black or brown – that's a problem.** Because that's going to lead to pride, to a sense of superiority. You'll start to elevate yourself or your kind over against others.
  
- ❖ **The whole point of this passage is that there's only one core identity that won't lead you down that ugly path.** That won't tempt you to lift yourself up (or your people up) in order to put down others. And that's the core identity of a Christian.
  - Because Christian simply means: **Wretched sinner; separated from God; deserving of only hostility BUT by the grace of God, saved through faith in a bloody cross; forgiven; accepted; loved by a heavenly Father.**
  
- ❖ **If being a Christian is at the core of your identity, then your ethnicity is just an ethnicity.** Your culture is just a culture. It's no longer defining you. It's no longer central to who you are. So you don't feel a need to defend it. Or an urge to elevate it over others. Because you're a Christian. And that's what really matters. **And now your ethnicity can just be enjoyed as it was meant to be – God's good gift meant to bless you and others.**