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A Cruciform Template for Unity in Ephesians 2.11–22

Jason W. Locke

I am honored to write this article commemorating the twenty-fifth anniversary of Leonard Allen's pivotal book *The Cruciform Church*. As a seminary student under Professor Allen at the time of the book's publication, I had little grasp of how important this work was for Churches of Christ. I understood the need to move beyond the legalism of our movement, but I did not yet fully comprehend just how difficult it would be to embrace an alternative healthier and more biblical way of understanding our shared Christian life.

One of the great weaknesses of legalism is its failure to adequately deal with fleshly divisions. In fact, legalism tends to promote divisions rather than heal them. To quote a popular maxim, "There are two kinds of people in the world—those who divide the world into two kinds of people and those who do not." Legalistic faith systems are especially keen to divide the world, and the sectarian leanings of many in Churches of Christ sadly operated in this manner throughout the twentieth century.

This perhaps helps to explain why a church so certain of its rightness could be so wrong on issues of race. Churches of Christ and its Christian institutions were culpable in promoting and maintaining racial divides. This legacy has been openly confessed and spoken of in only a few circles with any real sorrow over past transgressions. And that is precisely why it is so critical to pivot away from legalistic systems toward a cruciform faith. Legalism is a fleshly system dependent on dividing the world into those who can join the club based on some arbitrary mark of good fortune and those who cannot. I share the hope with many of my colleagues that Churches of Christ ought to join other worldwide faith communities in bridging barriers where possible rather than erecting them.

With this hope in mind, I want to briefly examine Ephesians 2.11–22 as a text that points toward this reorientation on multiple levels—age, race, socioeconomics, gender, and ethnicity. In particular, the cruciform nature of this text points away from human systems that promote division and replaces them with a Spirit-filled system capable of building a new humanity in Christ. I believe that this is a broadly felt need across nearly all church communities today.

The Church's Failure to Produce Racial Unity

Racism, ethnocentrism, sexism, ageism, and other biases continue to rear their heads well into the twenty-first century. In the United States alone, the killings of Michael Brown, Freddie Gray, Walter Scott, Samuel DuBose, and other unarmed blacks by white police officers sparked massive protests among the African-American community. Many whites then reacted negatively to these protests and with outrage to movements such as #blacklivesmatter, feeling they were thinly veiled excuses for violence and thuggery. Some national politicians have ridden to prominence on the back of these issues, and many ordinary Americans have felt their own personal emotions boiling over with frustration and fear.

Ideally, the church could act as a model platform for human unity amidst a world of tension and unease. As Bruce Fong pointed out in his 1995 article, however, the church has sadly exemplified "racial separation and

conformity to society's patterns."¹ The church should be a model for what is possible and for what unity should look like. Rather than showcasing a unity of believers, however, Fong argued that the church too often mirrors the world's divisions. Church leaders have long been aware of these problems. In the same vein, Billy Graham was able to write, "Racial and ethnic hostility is the foremost social problem facing our world today."²

Awareness of a problem and working toward an actual solution are two different matters. Christian scholarship has not exactly led the way in dealing with matters of discrimination. William Rader's excellent study on Ephesians 2.11–22 came out of his personal experience in the 1970s with an aging, white congregation in inner-city Cincinnati. The formerly white neighborhood had become predominantly African-American. The church's existential questions about how to overcome the racial divides of their society led to the discovery that, while racial division had been the subject of increasing scrutiny from sociological, psychological, and literary fields of studies, there was little to no research in this area among biblical scholars.³

Further exacerbating the problem is the fact that Christian missiologists have even leaned into the existence of racial hostility as a mechanism for fostering church growth. No clearer example of this exists than the church growth movement described by the late, esteemed Fuller Seminary professor Donald McGavran. His landmark book *Understanding Church Growth* actually endorsed human divisions as natural and therefore helpful tools for fomenting rapid church-growth movements. He wrote, "In most cases of the arrested growth of the Church, men are deterred not so much by the offense of the cross as by nonbiblical offenses. Nothing in the Bible, for instance, requires that *in becoming a Christian* a believer must cross linguistic, racial and class barriers."⁴ To his credit, McGavran went on to argue that transcending these barriers should occur after conversion as a "fruit of the Spirit," but the endorsement of ethnic and racial barriers as a tool for evangelism left a heavy mark on the modern church.

Perhaps the saddest example stemming from such thinking is the 1994 Rwanda genocide. It has been widely noted that Rwanda was the most Christianized nation-state on the African continent at the time of the genocide.⁵ One might argue that the fruit of the Spirit, as McGavran described it, had not yet been produced even after decades of Christianity. But this confronts us with an uncomfortable series of questions. Was the genocide a tragic coincidence that had no real connection to the baptized state of Hutus and Tutsis? Or was the genocide a sign that the church's approach to matters of racial, ethnic, and socioeconomic divisions was ineffectual and fundamentally flawed? We could also look to the examples of Yugoslavia, the world wars of the twentieth century, and many other recent tragic examples of intra-Christian warfare to see that the church has not automatically produced interracial, interethnic, and international peace even among fellow Christians.

In this article I propose that Ephesians 2.11–22 is a template for understanding how the Christian faith ought to unite people in ways that transcend human dividing lines. The church-growth philosophy of McGavran and others strongly implies following Jesus does not demand the traversing of complex human boundaries. By contrast, I believe that this passage argues the opposite. The cross of Christ does demand an end to human hostility, at least within the confines of the church. Leaning into this reality, however, requires a deeper understanding of this text's cruciform nature indicating that the work of bridging human divides is not ancillary or a fruit of the Spirit that comes at some future time. Rather, this movement toward unity lies at the very heart of the gospel.

1. B. Fong, "Addressing the Issue of Racial Reconciliation According to the Principles of Eph 2:11–22," *Journal for the Evangelical Theological Society* 38 (December 1995), 566. I'm grateful for the trajectory of Fong's research. This article is an attempt to update and expand upon his work.

2. B. Graham, "Racism and the Evangelical Church," *Christianity Today* 29 (October 4, 1993), 27.

3. William H. Rader, *The Church and Racial Hostility: A History of Interpretation of Ephesians 2:11–22*, reprint (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 1978), 1. Although forty years old, this provides an excellent overview of the history of thought and research on Ephesians 2.11–22 through twenty centuries of Christianity.

4. D. McGavran, *Understanding Church Growth*, rev. ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980), 230. Emphasis added.

5. For example, see John Barton, "Confusion and Communion: Christian Mission and Ethnic Identities in Postgenocide Rwanda," *Missiology* 40:3 (2012), 230.

Disunity among People of Faith in Biblical Times

Many biblical passages can and do serve as a challenge to the status quo of human divisions. I would be remiss if I did not admit, however, that some groups and individuals throughout Christian history have used the Bible as a justification for hatred. The not-so-distant memory of the Holocaust should serve as a warning against complacency by biblical scholars in this regard. Waiting for Christians to mature into ethnic and racial tolerance has proven to be a pipe dream. Simply put, Christian scholarship needs to take the initiative in explaining why the Bible does not tolerate hatred. Left to their own devices, too many have veered to the wrong extremes.

It is true that some sections of the Old Testament appear to point to the idea of Jewish nationalism or exceptionalism. Rather than supporting these ethnocentric claims, however, the biblical narrators appear to seek ways to temper these views, sometimes directly confronting such thinking.⁶ The Book of Jonah is but one demonstration of prophetic rebuke against ethnic hatred.

By the time of Jesus's ministry, Jewish loathing for outsiders seems to have reached all-time highs in at least some sectors of Palestinian Judaism. The gospels paint a picture of a Judaism filled with little sympathy for non-Jews. In Luke 4.16–30, Jesus's application of Jubilee to Gentiles such as the Sidonian widow of Zarephath and Naaman the Syrian nearly cost him his life in his hometown synagogue. This antipathy from Jews toward Gentiles is readily apparent in non-biblical sources as well. This enmity was not just from Jews to Gentiles but was often reciprocated by Gentiles who resented Jewish arrogance and separatism.⁷

Paul's epistles together with the Book of Acts also describe the racial challenges of the early church. Early Jewish believers struggled to fully incorporate Gentile Christians without demanding that they become Jewish. The Jewish council of Acts 15 along with lines of argumentation in the books of Romans and Galatians reveal the strength of Judaizing forces.

After a few decades, however, the shoe was on the other foot. A predominantly Gentile church began to struggle with the question of whether Jewish converts to Christianity could be Christians at all unless they totally parted ways with their Jewish heritage and customs. By the year 200 AD, it was possible to speak of two entirely unconnected religions, Judaism and Christianity, which by all rights had been previously intertwined for decades.⁸

Ephesians 2.11–22 and a Cross-Shaped Unity

In Ephesians 2.11–22 Paul addresses key questions about who has the rightful claim to be the people of God.⁹ Other important touchstones exist throughout the New Testament (e.g., Acts 15; Rom 3.9ff; Gal 3.27–29), but I think this text points in helpful directions that the church has either poorly understood or weakly followed. What does a cross-shaped church look like? Are Gentile Christians admitted entrance into the people of Israel? Should the norm of Christian life be separate ethnic churches or enclaves that maintain their unique identities?

Paul's teaching in this text specifically addresses the relationship between Jewish and Gentile Christians. His eye is not on rifts in the broader society. The focus is not on how to make the Roman Empire a more equitable place to live. Perhaps Paul had well-formed opinions on broader social issues, but we know little or nothing about these from New Testament writings. What Paul speaks of here and elsewhere is the relationship of various peoples who are situated as members of the body of Christ. His primary line of concern is the

6. As one example, the biblical narrators primarily framed the prohibition of intermarriage between Abraham's descendants and the Canaanites (Gen 28.1; Josh 23.12–13; 1 Kgs 11.1–2; Neh 13.27; etc.) as an issue of idolatry rather than of racism or ethnocentrism. The stories of Ruth and Rahab demonstrate openness to outsiders.

7. For an excellent summary of Jewish–Gentile hostility, see Charles H. Talbert, *Ephesians & Colossians*, Paideia Commentaries on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2007), 80–81. See also Ernest Best, *Essays on Ephesians* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1997), 88–89; PHEME PERKINS, *Ephesians*, Abingdon New Testament Commentaries (Nashville: Abingdon, 1997), 67.

8. Talbert, 93.

9. I recognize there are legitimate questions about Pauline authorship of Ephesians. For simplicity's sake, I am accepting Pauline authorship because I do not believe this question has a substantial bearing on the conversation at hand.

fraught relationships in the church. The fragile churches of the first century faced tension both from within (thanks to the very nature of human relationships) and from without (due to interlopers seeking to impose Jewish legalism upon Paul's Christian communities). The fact that Paul aims to bridge differences among Christians rather than in society at large is a crucial point, and I will briefly return to it.

This brings us to the shape of Ephesians 2.11–22. Interpreters have no shortage of suggestions about the nature of this passage: Is it a tightly constructed chiasm, pre-Pauline hymn for baptismal purposes, pre-Christian or Gnostic origin, a parallel rehashing of 2.1–10, or a reworking of Colossians 1.21–23?¹⁰ Each line of thought may have legitimate claims to make.

I would argue that the primary feature of this passage is its focus on Jesus and the cross. The work of Jesus, namely his death on the cross, lies at the heart of this section. It moves from human work (divisions) to Christ's work (the cross) to the Spirit's work (building a united people).

In this sense, Ephesians 2.11–22 functions comparably to the role of Philippians 2.6–11 in that letter. This Philippians cross-shaped text directs readers to Jesus's kenotic submission, his willingness to die on a cross. Often described as a pre-Pauline hymn, it lays out the cruciform nature of discipleship, and this thought informs the rest of Paul's address to the Philippian church: "Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus" (Phil 2.5).

Ephesians 2.11–22 has a similar, cruciform shape—both literally and metaphorically—that heavily influences the rest of this epistle. The only occurrence in Ephesians of the word *cross* is here (v. 16). The cross functions rhetorically not only as the location of Jesus's death but also as the final resting place for human hostility. It is able to transcend and transform human divisions.

Surrounding the cross, we find multiple uses of two important terms: *flesh* and *spirit*. First, flesh is emblematic of the human tendency to judge and subdivide. Flesh produces barriers of hostility and opposes the work of the Spirit (cf. Rom 7.5, 18; 8.3; 1 Cor 3.1; Gal 6.12, etc.). Paul begins this passage by defining both major groups, Jews and Gentiles, as being demarcated and divided by the flesh. The word appears twice in verse 11, first to explain that Gentiles are defined "in the flesh"¹¹ by nature of their uncircumcision, and then to describe Jews as having been artificially set apart by their circumcision "in the flesh."¹² This depiction of circumcision as a human or fleshly act would no doubt have been insulting to Jews who believed it to be a divine mark of distinction.¹³ Paul says, however, that the separation between Jews and Gentiles is fleshly and therefore artificial. Even more damning is what it produces—subsets of the human race who are either arrogant about their privileged position or who are excluded from the promises of God.

Just as the basic problem lies in the flesh, the answer ironically lies in the flesh as well. According to Paul's logic, it is Jesus's flesh (v. 14) that brings both groups together. Throughout Ephesians, Paul lays out the argument that Christians dwell in Christ. Through the grace of God, people who were once dead in their transgressions and sins can be made alive together with Christ, being raised up with him and seated with him in the heavenly places in Christ (2.1–7). This is essentially the same line of reasoning here in 2.11–22. Whereas Christians used to be "children of wrath" and "dead" (2.1–3), believers in this section were once separated from each other. Gentiles were "aliens" and "strangers to the covenants of promise" (2.12). Here the answer is not God's mercy poured out by making us alive in Christ (2.4) but rather "his flesh" that breaks down the dividing wall or the hostility between people (2.14). In this way, Jesus becomes our peace. Our flesh produces hostility. Jesus's flesh produces peace.¹⁴

10. For an excellent overview of these and other issues, see Andrew T. Lincoln, *Ephesians*, Word Biblical Commentary Series (Dallas: Word Books, 1990), 124–131. See also Talbert, 76.

11. The NRSV translates this as "by birth." While it is an accurate translation, this masks Paul's important wordplay.

12. John Paul Heil argues that verse 11 is a mini-chiasm that highlights the flesh division: circumcised versus uncircumcised. Both distinctions are fleshly. Heil, *Ephesians: Empowerment to Walk in Love for the Unity of All in Christ* (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2007), 111.

13. Clinton E. Arnold, *Ephesians*, Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2010), 154.

14. Marriage is one example in Ephesians where unity in the flesh is possible. Through self-sacrificing love that causes one to "leave father and mother," two otherwise separated people can mysteriously become "one flesh." Divisions in the flesh can only be overcome by the kind of loving sacrifice demonstrated in the cross.

Second, the word *Spirit* describes the work of God that flows out of Jesus's peace-making. Whereas the human flesh is the place of division and Jesus's flesh is where division dies, Spirit is God's work of doing something meaningful with this now unified people. Jews and Gentiles, the relevant groups in Ephesians, both have access to God "in one Spirit" (2.18). Christians are built together into a dwelling place for God "in the Spirit" (2.22).¹⁵ The Spirit is at work to build something new for God to inhabit and indwell. In what might be a nod to Ezekiel 37, Paul states that the Spirit brings new creation to what is otherwise dead, hopeless, and divided.¹⁶

The Spirit of God in this text is not akin to the spirit "that is now at work among those who are disobedient" (2.2) or to "spiritual forces" against which we must battle (6.12). The Spirit that works to unite differing peoples is what we are to be filled with (5.18) and through which we are to "make every effort to maintain the unity" (4.3). While the flesh is the destroyer of good and builder of enmity, the Spirit is the builder of unity that creates a dwelling place for God.

Jesus's flesh is the place of peace where enmity goes to die, and a single humanity inside Christ is the result of the Spirit's work. The world might be divided by hostility, but Jesus puts that hostility to death by allowing his flesh to be the killing field. After tearing down the dividing wall, a single, united body comes forth. Paul goes on to speak of "one body" (4.4) flowing out of the unity of the Spirit and the bond of peace (4.3), another key term in this passage also.

What exactly is this body? Is it a spiritual ideal that exists in spite of physical realities? How does this happen with Jews (who were people of the promise) and Gentiles (who were excluded from the promise)? Do Gentiles now come under the umbrella of the Jewish people?

God through the Spirit builds a new people who are not bound by fleshly distinctions. Gentiles inherit Israel's legacy not by assimilating into Judaism but rather through God's act of new creation in the cross of Christ.¹⁷ The nearness of verse 13 is not nearness to Jews but rather nearness to God.¹⁸ Gentile Christians now belong to the people of God, but not because they are part of Israel. Both races needed to be reconciled. Even Jews had fallen short of the promises of God.¹⁹ Instead, both groups are fellow "citizens with the saints" (2.19) in God's new humanity.²⁰

This *citizen* language undoubtedly carried heavy import to residents in the Roman world who understood the distinct privileges of being a citizen of the Empire. While individuals may come to the cross of Christ as Gentiles, Jews, whites, Latinos, Asian Americans, etc., Paul's rhetoric points to the fact that Christians are no longer to see themselves primarily according to those categories.²¹ This means no single group can claim the right to define this new humanity, for such definition is the realm of God's Spirit. There are no aliens in God's humanity. If Jesus provided a new, common position for all people to stand united upon, this should be something that the Church feels obligated to perpetuate and not settle for anything less.²²

So the cross is the central, transformative piece in Ephesians 2.11–22, flanked on either side by two destructive uses of *flesh* and two reconstructive uses of *Spirit*. These highlight life before and after entry into the people of faith. The cross is the bridge from death to life, from division to unity, from hatred to peace. This is the cruciform shape of Ephesians 2.11–22, illuminating the path of bringing peace to the body of

15. Here again, the NRSV loses the wordplay by translating "in the Spirit" as "spiritually," which may indeed be an excellent and proper translation but which masks an important point.

16. In both texts, the Spirit is the one who gives life. Robert H. Suh, "The Use of Ezekiel 37 in Ephesians 2," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 50:4 (2007), 732.

17. Perkins, 77.

18. Best, 101.

19. Andrew T. Lincoln, "The Church and Israel in Ephesians 2," *The Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 49 (1987), 613.

20. Ibid, 615.

21. For a helpful discussion of this issue on a much deeper level, see the excellent article by Benjamin H. Dunning, "Strangers and Aliens No Longer: Negotiating Identity and Difference in Ephesians 2," *Harvard Theological Review* 99:1 (2006), 13-15.

22. Fong, 572.

Christ. An otherwise divided humanity becomes a unified dwelling place for God only when it first totally submits to the reconciling work of Jesus.

Conclusion

Why has the Church often failed to produce a deep and lasting legacy of unity in societies filled with racial, ethnic, generational, gender, and socioeconomic differences? How can the church more effectively be a beacon of peace in a sea of turmoil? I believe Ephesians 2.11–22 points in some helpful directions for those involved in congregational ministry.

In my own context as preaching minister for a church in Fresno, California, this passage has the power to inform my ministry in relevant ways. First, racial tensions have once again reared their head in our society, and the vitriol from the public discourse leaks over into congregational life. In my own church, I have felt and seen evidence of racially charged comments, attitudes, and Facebook posts that promote suspicion and division within our church. Even though our church enjoys racial, ethnic, and socioeconomic diversity that reflects our diverse region, this has not guaranteed Spirit-breathed unity in the face of societal division.

The cross-shaped template of Ephesians 2.11–22 forces me as a leader and pastor to not be content with this state of affairs. I need to be intentional about “dragging people through the cross” in order to reflect together on our beliefs and behaviors in light of Jesus’s work. We have used workshops, discussions groups, and other tools to help people go through the hard work of becoming cruciform in their dealings with fellow Christians, work that will hopefully allow God to indwell our church in a way that is evident to outsiders.

Second, our church has become more deliberate about the use of weekly communion to foster a cross-shaped fellowship. By its very definition, communion should foster the transformative work of Jesus in a church’s midst, but our heritage had handed us a perfunctory ritual that had a tendency of reinforcing individualism rather than building a cross-shaped community. Instead of passing communion trays, we began to invite people to tables spread throughout our worship center. This forces people to greet one another, hopefully in the name of Christ, and creates the potential for church members to bridge divides rather than strengthen them.

Ephesians 2.11–22 lays out a strong case for the hard work of unity. Can you have a racially or ethnically segregated church and call it cruciform? Can you have a church focused solely on one generation and call it cruciform? Can you have a church that says its way is the only way and expect the peace of Christ to flow forth from that arrogance? I think not.

Of course, one might argue that all churches—just like all Christians—should not be judged by their imperfect status. I wish I could testify about our church’s dramatic, immediate transformation based on the template of this passage. No such story exists. In fact, forces of resistance have grown up in opposition as we seek to apply the words of Paul to our context in Fresno. Like all churches, however, we are a work in progress.

I believe that passages like Ephesians 2.11–22 remind us that the cost of peace is not cheap or simple. If the cross is the path for true acceptance among believers and if we understand just how difficult it is to take up the cross of Jesus, then we will comprehend how daunting is the task that lies before us as servants and leaders in the church today.

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