

Gospel Unity

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Date: 11 January 2026

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[0 : 00] We can dismiss our kids to children's ministry, and you can be seated.! You'll open your Bibles this morning to Ephesians chapter 2.! We'll be in verse 11 all the way through the end of the chapter.

Ephesians chapter 2, beginning in verse 11. This is a passage that is obvious at one level. It's about God creating reconciliation and unity in relationships that used to be defined by hostility.

Look at verse 11. Therefore, remember that at one time, you Gentiles in the flesh, called the uncircumcision by what is called the circumcision, which is made in the flesh by hands.

Remember that you were at that time separated from Christ, alienated from the commonwealth of Israel, and strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world. But now in Christ Jesus, you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ. For he himself is our peace, who has made us both one and broken down in his flesh, the dividing wall of hostility.

[1 : 18] Now, there are a lot of kinds of unity in the world. We'll talk about this a little bit this morning. There are all kinds of reconciliations that people pursue, all sorts of harmonizations that people pursue.

But the kind of reconciliation that God provides through Jesus is unique at a bunch of different levels, and I want to explain that to you this morning. The first thing I want to note, though, is that this is an applicable unity.

What I mean by that is that this passage that we're looking at today describes the reconciliation that took place on the cross between the Jews and the rest of the nations, or between the rest of the nations and the Jews.

But, you know, you don't want to preach this passage in a historical sense. Like, the point of this passage this morning is not to say, good news, guys, the Jews have to let us into their club.

Like, that's not the way this passage is intended to be preached or applied. You might ask yourself this question. This is the question that I asked as I was working through not just this text, but a number of other texts that say the same thing.

[2 : 26] And that is, why did God preserve in His eternal Word this particular story of Jewish and Gentile harmonization when, for the majority of the millennia that would follow, including the time we're in now, the question of whether the Gentiles get let in is not a highly relevant question any longer.

Like, why would God go through such great care to preserve this story, this phenomenon in His Word, for us, when the question about Gentile inclusion has long been settled and no one even thinks, well, not many people think, dispensationalists still make this a big deal, but the rest of us, like, we're just like, yeah, cool.

Why did God take such great care to put these passages in the Scriptures? And the answer is this. God expects throughout His Word for us to reason from greater to lesser.

He expects us to take great miraculous things and reason the basic ideas in those great miraculous things down into the lesser things of our life.

So the principles in this passage are important and can be applied in every situation where reconciliation or unity is to be sought.

[3 : 47] We don't want to keep this passage locked in its historical setting. We want to look at the particular principles in this passage and understand this has something to teach everybody about the nature of the unity that pleases God, about the nature of the unity and the peace and the reconciliation that God has provided through His cross.

Another way of saying this is, in theory, a couple comes to me and they're just having intractable arguments. They just can't get along. They're married. In theory, this is what I'm claiming and I hope to prove it through the sermon.

In theory, I could say, okay, here is this one passage. Take Ephesians 2, 11 through 22 and you can only read this passage as your primary starting point.

I'll give you all my commentaries, all my lexicons. You'll have access to the Greek and so forth. But you have to study this passage until you can come back to me and tell me the solution to your problems.

And if they were attentive and careful and thoughtful and used the materials provided to them, all of the principles that bring harmony in any situation exist in this passage.

[5 : 04] And so these passages are, at the one hand, sort of like God parted the Red Sea, a marvelous unfolding of supernatural grace that leaves us baffled.

And then it's our job as Christians to take the marvelous huge thing and apply the principles in it to the lesser instances in our lives. So that's what we'll be doing today.

And in order to do that, I'm just going to pull apart the principles in this passage and then we'll apply them. We'll kind of keep this bickering couple dialogue continuing so we can see how to apply these great things to something smaller.

So the first idea is this. This particular kind of unity is an ontological unity. You're like, what? Chris, stop. Ontological unity.

Well, all I mean by that is that this is not a unity that is built on superficial compromise. The people, the Jews and the Gentiles haven't gone from bickering to letting bygones be bygones.

[6 : 08] They haven't decided to stop their beef. They have become new people and they've become one new people. This isn't just let's stop arguing and agree to disagree.

This is a unity that comes about through a new creation. We are born again into Christ, both Jew and Gentile, and have become a new thing.

Look at verse 14. For he himself is our peace who has made us both one and has broken down in his flesh the dividing wall of hostility by abolishing the law of commandments expressed in ordinances that he might create in himself one new man in place of two, so making peace.

We'll get to the ordinances thing here in a minute. But the thing I want you to see here is that the kind of unity that God brings is ontological. It's a new creation. The kind of unity that God expects to bring upon the earth is not simply by keeping people from arguing or choosing to overlook differences.

The kind of unity that he's bringing about is I'm going to make people a new creation under one new head. And it's important that we understand this because, you know, the Bible is very explicit about one kind of unity, and that is Christians have absolutely no excuse bickering because they are the same.

[7 : 41] When Christians bicker, this is kind of an autoimmune disease kind of a deal. It's literally parts of the body turning on itself. So on the one hand, this ontological unity does this cool thing where it raises the bar massively for the Christian environment.

And it says, y'all are the same. Your disagreement, your disunity is not okay. While at the same time, one of the things we'll see throughout this passage is God's unity is for God's sake, and it brings glory to God.

So ontological unity says, y'all Christians, if you're the same, look at how stupid this is that you are fighting. This is insane.

The hand is fighting the foot. What is going on here? It really creates a dramatic clarity on the problem of disunity within the church while simultaneously setting expectations relatively low for how we will relate to the world and any possible unity that we can have with the world.

Why? Well, actually, Josh had us read one of the passages that explains that in 1 John, and that is this. With ontological unity, same goes with same.

[9 : 02] But we are not the same as the world ontologically. We have different fathers. We're different creations. We're actually different spiritual species. And so the Bible, this is very important because some of us think that to be a good Christian means to get along with everybody in every way all the time.

It's like, as a Christian with other Christians, the standard is really high, actually. But as a Christian interacting with the world, the Bible says stuff like, as much as it depends on you, be at peace with

everybody, while simultaneously and constantly saying, and we know that the world will hate you because you're a different thing than the world.

So one of the big principles is to understand the unity that I'm seeking. Is it ontological unity? Am I seeking unity with something that's like me or something that's not like me?

And then sort of setting your expectations accordingly. Okay? So that's the first principle in the passage. The second one is another big word. This one's really necessary, though. I don't know another word for this.

And that is that this is a hegemonic unity. Hegemonic unity. What do I mean by that? Well, look at verse 17 and focus in on the word citizens that comes in verse 19.

[10:19] Okay. And he came and preached peace to you who were far off and peace to those who were near. For through him we both have access in one spirit to the Father.

So then, you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God.

What does the word hegemony mean? If you've heard that word, I doubt you've ever heard it used positively. But it's actually a great word and it actually has extraordinarily important theological value.

What is a hegemony? A hegemony is like Rome where one thing is, one entity is in charge and it's an empire and it rules over dozens of different cultures.

Okay? And so when we read our Gospels, we read the New Testament, what's happening is all these places, Jerusalem, Philippi, you know, all these different places are their own distinct cultures, in some respects even maybe their own distinct races, their own distinct nations, and they've been swallowed up by the Roman Empire with this philosophy called hegemony, which is basically if you have differences than us, that's fine.

[11:38] In fact, we might even like some of your differences. We might even celebrate some of your differences. All of the differences can coexist so long as they don't do anything to threaten the king of kings.

The phrase king of kings didn't come just directly out of Luke's imagination or Daniel's or so forth. King of kings is a very common concept in the ancient world because the ancient world was largely hegemonic. And so who's the boss over all the other bosses? Who's the king over the king of Syria?

Who's the king over the king of Babylon? So on and so forth. And so one of the things that's interesting about Christian unity is that it is very similar to that kind of power.

Let me just read the definition that I wrote just to make sure we're clear on this because it's a very important point. In the most basic sense, hegemoni names the way of a ruling authority brings real unity across genuine difference.

[12:38] Under a good and ordered reign, diverse peoples are not erased but coordinated. Languages, customs, and local identities are accommodated even honored so long as they harmonize with the larger rule.

In that sense, hegemoni is not inherently oppressive. It is simply the question of how many become one without ceasing to be many. What Paul is describing in Ephesians is the fulfillment of that idea. Jews are still Jews in some sense. Gentiles are still Gentiles, especially if we're talking about race. There's not a homogeneity where they all become the same thing in that sense.

They're still allowed to be distinct and individual. This isn't the Borg. But, as long as those differences don't interrupt or cause discordance with the overall reign, the unity that exists within the kingdom of God, within the church, the unity that will exist in heaven, Revelation says that the nations come in with their glory.

What does that tell you? That tells you that whatever is going to happen in the future, national identity will remain a thing. Right? That there will be distinctives of race and nation and so forth all the way through, all the way to the end so that there are recognizable nations coming to the throne.

[14:14] But, those recognizable nations are submitted to the emperor, to the king of the kings, Jesus Christ. Now, this is very important for our bickering couple because one of the things that will happen early on and especially in an immature couple would be that the differences are viewed immediately as threats rather than delights.

I always joke that one advantage of getting married, like, I met my wife when I had been 18 for two weeks. She had, she was not 18 when we met.

She's almost 18. We're two weeks apart. And, one of the great advantages of getting married, you know, so young is, like, neither of us had developed an opinion on how to, like, squeeze the toothpaste out of the tube.

So, like, a lot of the differences that people actually get really attached to, we just didn't have a lot of those. And, we just didn't have a lot of opinions, to be honest with you.

So, there was a sort of an easy unity there because of that. We didn't, we didn't have a lot of preferences. But, even in situations where those preferences are more defined, those are going to be a source of conflict and disunity, whether they're cultural or received from your family or so on and so forth.

[15:37] And, you're going to have to figure out, are these differences threatening to the hegemonic claim of Jesus? If not, guess what? we have to figure out a way to make accommodation for them, delightfully so, Philippians 2, looking out only for our own interests and preferences, but also for the interests and preferences of others.

And, so we need to think more clearly about, we are not looking for Borg Christians, we are not looking to homogenize the nations, we're not looking to spread capitalism around the entire world, or democracy around the entire world.

We are looking to spread the gospel of Jesus Christ around the entire world. And, there's a way within the kingdom of God where massive differences can become not just tolerated, but celebrated, so long as they are in consistency with the word of God.

So, in your relationships, this becomes a huge deal. Now, in this passage, one of the unique features of this passage is that the differences came about because of the law of God.

Look at verse 14. For he himself is our peace, who has made us both one and has broken down in his flesh the dividing wall of hostility. Look at verse 15.

[17:03] By abolishing the law of commandments expressed in ordinances, that he might create in himself one new man in place of the two, so making peace, and might reconcile us both to God in one body through the cross, thereby killing the hostility.

So, my theoretical couple who can't come back and see me until they've dropped all the gems out of this passage, they're going to get to this line. They're going to have to figure out what, okay, abolishing the law of commandments expressed in the ordinances.

That seems important to Paul's argument. What does that mean? Well, then they would have to turn to one of the 1689 Confession, the Westminster Confession. They'd have to figure out that the Bible, the Old Testament, has three different kinds of law.

The Old Testament has three different kinds of law. There's the civil law, which God revealed as a way of instructing governments on how to rule righteously.

It has passed in a sense of literalism, but the general equity that the ideas that exist in the civil law continue to apply to this day. Pretty much all righteous nations have the Old Testament laws embedded into their legal structure in very significant ways.

[18:21] There's the moral law, which is God's way of talking about his character and his righteousness and defining what sin is outside of that category of righteousness.

That continues. But then there's the ceremonial law. What's the ceremonial law? The ceremonial law is the stuff that was used to govern the worship and distinctiveness of God's Old Testament people.

The ceremonial law were the rules in the Old Testament that were used to govern and distinguish God's Old Testament people from the rest of the nations. And we can tell both logically and textually from this passage that when Paul talks about Jesus abolishing the law of the ordinances, he's talking about abolishing the ceremonial law.

This is going to just, there's no way for this not to feel foggy for a second, but I think we can get out of the mud pretty quickly. Okay? So what Paul is clearly saying is he's like, he's talking about this set of rules that God gave through Moses and that were later added to by the, by the Pharisees and so forth.

the set of rules that distinguish God's people as unique recipients of God's covenant promises. And what kind of laws are we talking about here?

[19:39] Circumcision, Paul references that directly in verse 11, hand washing, ceremonies, food laws, so on and so forth. What Paul is saying here is that there was a whole category of law in the Old Testament that was actually designed to create hostility between the Jew and the Gentile.

It was what computer scientists and engineers taught boundary conditions. It created a demarcation line between those who are in and those who are out.

And when Jesus came, he specifically fulfilled those laws so completely so as to say that they are abolished. Jesus is fulfilling all the law in various ways, but when it comes to the questions of hand washing and other ceremonial laws, Jesus fulfilled all of those simply by dying as the righteous king on the cross, receiving all of the impurity, all of the uncleanness of the Gentiles on himself, and thereby abolishing this whole category of law.

law. So why does that, like how do we apply that to our couples? Well, I don't, I can't go all the way into this because of time, but there's a companion passage in Colossians 2 that where Paul says the same stuff he's saying here.

It's Colossians 2, 18 through 21, 22. I'm going to skip over a lot of this just because I can tell we're getting to the end of our capacities here for abstraction.

[21 : 21] That's totally fine. I totally get it. But what Paul does in Colossians is he says that it's not just the ceremonial law that divides people.

It's just all of the things that we use to demarcate who's in and who's out. And we, and so one way to think about this is a lot of people think that the apostles were all running around putting out disunity brush fires that all related to Jews and Gentiles.

And the only, the first part of that statement's true. Most of what it meant to be a pastor in the first century was to put out brush fires of disunity and disagreement. But the Jew Gentile thing was only part.

Everybody was doing different stuff to mark who was in and who was out. And that's why James has to say don't give preference to the rich person because there's a category that humans do.

It's not did you wash your hands the right way? Are you eating shellfish or not? It's like has God blessed you with wealth or not? If you read the New Testament and just study division and just think why are all these divisions taking place?

[22 : 34] It's not Jew Gentile. Not really. It's this thing we talked about back at Christmas time, the stoichia, the elementary principles that people use to decide who's good and who's bad, who's right and who's wrong, who's in and who's out.

You know, Paul's not dealing with a Jew Gentile problem with the Corinthians when he says some of you say you're from Paul and some of you say you're from Apollos and everything. No. What's going on fundamentally that causes disunity in the New Testament is that people say Jesus has saved me by grace and I do not want to live in a reality that makes me so unimportant and unspecial.

And so I will start pulling some of the things I think are important out as additional ways of measuring status, as additional ways of measuring maturity, in-group preferencing, and so forth. Every single person in this room does that. And, you know, people harp on particular things like race or something like that. Like, guys, that's just one of a thousand ways that human beings try to outmaneuver grace alone by adding works back into the equation.

And that's actually the heart of this passage. If you want to understand what cures disunity, it is grace alone. Because, why?

[23 : 59] Well, Paul tells us earlier in Ephesians 2, there can be no boasting. And all disunity at its heart flows from a problem with boasting.

So the main idea in this principle, you have to, like, attach it back to the previous section in Ephesians 2, and that is, is when you are fighting, deep down in that part of you that you don't necessarily know knows, the deep knower that we talked about last week, that part of you is believing something more than the gospel.

It's holding something as a Jesus plus. It's putting something next to Christ, and you're using that something, whoever's causing the argument, and maybe both of you are, you're using those somethings in ways that God did not intend for them to be used.

So that's kind of the quick overview of what's going on regarding the ordinances. Really, in the Jew-Gentile situation, there were a particular set of ordinances, circumcision, food laws, and so forth, that were causing that.

But when you study the concept of conflict in the New Testament altogether, you see that that gets expanded not just to hand-washing or food laws, but to literally anything that you could use to make yourself feel superior to another person.

[25 : 32] That's really the heart of disunity in the New Testament. Okay, and that kind of brings us to the next point. This is a teleological unity.

Now, again, a big word, but teleology just refers to the end for which a thing was created, the purpose for which a thing was created. And I suppose all unity has a purpose.

You know, like, I suppose every kind of peace that someone is seeking has a purpose. Like, I just don't want to, I just want to watch the football game, so I'm just going to tell my wife she's right when she's clearly not. Oh, church is full of cowardly men like that who couldn't stand to, like, just have a few nights of no warmth and don't know how to just be lone long enough even when you're right.

Women are the same way. So, people pursue unity for all sorts of crazy reasons. In fact, there's all kinds of unities in the Bible that are explicitly sinful. There's a word, there's a one word for a unity that is built for some other purpose than God, and that word is babble.

like, there's all sorts of cooperative schemes. Psalm 2, why do the nations rage? The kings of the earth conspire together. That's what's happening at the cross.

[26 : 59] People who were not friends became friends, became unified for a particular purpose. So, what I'm trying to get at when I talk about the teleological goal of unity is unity is not a good in and of itself.

We are not to pursue unity for unity's sake. We are not to pursue peace for peace's sake. That's what the post-war consensus is, by the way, young men. It is a golden calf moment after the weariness of war where our forefathers, so weary from terrible things, in reaction to the great violence and death they had seen, made a golden calf out of peace.

Now, young people, young men, you have not seen a tenth of what those people have seen. So, maybe don't judge so much these people.

But what's going on with the post-war consensus is just, man, that was terrible. I want peace desperately. Let's make an idol to peace. peace. And to this day, you see Christians making an idol out of racial reconciliation, as if it is the end goal, making an idol out of unity, making an idol out of harmony.

It's like, no, there's a kind of unity, there's a kind of racial reconciliation, there's a kind of harmony that pleases God because its aim is to glorify God. And then there's a kind that is essentially aimed to glorify us, to be little trophies to how tolerant we are, to be little trophies for how unprincipled we are, to be frank.

[28 : 45] And so, the unity has a goal if it's God's unity and it is to bring glory to God. Now, this is massive, this is where the text ends, this is the main point of the text, look at verse 18.

You can see the purpose for the unity that Paul's describing in verses 18-17. 22. For through him we both have access to one spirit, to the Father, so then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God.

Built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus himself being the cornerstone in whom the whole structure, being joined together, grows into a holy temple in the Lord.

in him, you also are being built together into a dwelling place for God by the Spirit. What's the purpose of the unity God miraculously created through Christ so that we can give ourselves tolerance trophies, like, so that we could keep our Facebook profile updated with the latest cause and appear highly cosmopolitan and empathetic?

The purpose of the unity that God's talking about is to bring glory to God. Now, back to our little warring couple. This is one of the main issues that you have to sort of resolve in a question of conflict.

[30 : 21] conflict. Why do I want the conflict to end? Why do I want the conflict to end? Do I want it to end because I'm weary?

Do I want it to end because, man, dinner is a bummer these days? Do I want it to end because I want to be right?

No. The Bible's really clear. you should view disunity as a defilement of God's glory and be eager for its end so that God can be glorified in your relationships.

And it is incredible once you realize, like, that's my goal, to bring glory to God. It's incredible how you begin to more clearly navigate preferences that you can give on versus convictions you can't, you know, word, the word of God and so on and so forth.

So, this couple has done probably three years worth of seminary level work and they come back to me and they say, we fixed it all, you're right, it was all in this passage, and I'll say, okay, well, what

did you see in this passage that made you realize the problems?

[31 : 39] And they would say, well, first of all, our marriage is between two believers. We were born again of God and we are both members of the household of God.

Our fighting is whack. It's a thing that should not be. And by the way, we found out that some of our fighting has to do with our lost mother-in-law.

people. And one of us was trying to pursue a peace that wasn't actually even possible with her. And it was at the expense of our Christian marriage.

So we would say, we've realized that our marriage is between two Christians and that when we fight, it's like a hand beating a foot or something. It's just nuts. So it's given us a whole new understanding of what fighting really is in the eyes of God.

okay, it's like, okay, well, what else? Well, we've realized that we're under a hegemony. Like, oh, you've learned about hegemonies. Like, yes. Like, well, what do you see about hegemonies that's helped your marriage?

[32 : 39] It's like, God's in charge, his rule, his law, and we are both living under his law. And this means that our differences, our preferences, can be in a godly way, truly cosmopolitan, and accommodated so far as they are not against God's law.

And we have learned to be much more generous with personality types, and more generous with approaches, and perspectives, and so forth, because God's great kingdom under the king of kings is not homogenizing everything into the thing that we think it should be.

Okay, cool, cool. Now, how does that show up? Well, like, sometimes it's pretty obvious that we just have different preferences, and then it's a race to see who gets to honor the other, because the Bible says to outdo one another in showing honor.

Okay, cool. And number three, what else did you learn? They say, well, when we came to be a pastor, we wanted to have an end to our fighting because we didn't want to be a couple that was fighting, or we just didn't like to fight, or we wanted one of us to win, and so on and so forth, but now we've realized that the whole purpose of our marriage is not me to win, or this, it's just to bring glory to God.

Like, the unity that we have, it shouldn't even exist. Our marriage is a miracle, our love is a miracle, our self-denial is a miracle, our outdoing one another to show honor is a miracle, and that all brings glory to God.

[34 : 19] God, and I'm like, you've studied the Jew and Gentile passage correctly. Like, that's what Paul is doing in Ephesians, and that's what all of the conflict passages in the New Testament are most fundamentally about.

Pick the pieces apart, and you see that Jesus has brought a kind of peace that ought to be celebrated and embraced and understood to be completely different than anything that the world's got going on.

So when we come to the table today, we won't read that whole passage, but I think a lot of you know that that passage in 1 Corinthians 11, it starts with a massive correction.

These people who should be under this gospel harmony are doing anything but as they celebrate the table. And so what I encourage you today is to say, boy, I actually really love the unity that God has purchased for me through Christ, and as I participate in this table, I understand that has come at a great price and I want to do honor to that price by pursuing godly unity in my relationships and so forth.

And if you're visiting with us today, if I were visiting, I'd be like, oh, this church must have a ton of problems and the pastors, you know, straightening everybody out. That is absolutely not the case. This is just the passage that we're in and this is the application that I think the Lord's led us to.

[35 : 45] So when you come to the table, I just want you to ask, God, do I understand the peace that you've secured between me and you? That by your blood I have been made righteous?

And then do I understand that in the Christian life, every vertical reality has a horizontal implication? And that this means something for all of my relationships? So let me pray for me, pray for us, and then come and get the elements.

Father God, we pray that you would absolutely allow the glories of gospel unity to land on us so that they can have operative difference in our lives.

Please, God, make it so that we are better at loving one another, that we are more eager, Lord, to, in our relationships, acknowledge Christ as Lord.

And may this table, which is celebrating your glorious conquest of sin, may this table confirm that what you've called us to, you will empower.

[36 : 51] We pray these things in Jesus' name. Amen. Come.