

“Beyond Coexistence to Oneness” | Ephesians 2:14-18

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(Discussion questions on page 7)

You may be familiar with the popular bumper sticker, *COEXIST*. It typically uses religious symbols to spell the word—the C is the Islamic crescent moon, the O a peace-sign, the X a Star of David, the T as Cross, and so forth. It was created by a Polish graphic designer in 2000 to represent tolerance between religions.

In a diverse world coexistence is necessary and important. For the sake of civility, people must respect the freedoms of those different than them.

However, *coexistence* is not an ultimately satisfying answer for what we are after. We want something more.

Imagine the family headed out for a week vacation with the mom announcing, “our goal for this week, family, is to coexist.” The kids may laugh. But the family is aiming at so much more than tolerance of one another—they want to be united, to be together, to be one.

Christianity has always aimed at this deeper unity. From its inception it wrestled with uniting people from different religious, ethnic, economic backgrounds. Its message, however, has never been about tolerating each other. It has been about becoming *one*.

Jesus prays in the hours before he is betrayed,

Holy Father, keep them in your name, which you have given me, that they may be **one**, even as we are one.... I do not ask for these only, but also for those who will believe in me through their world, that they may all be **one** (Jn 17:17, 20-21).

And Paul says the same here, in Ephesians 2:14-15, where he details how Jesus brings Jews and Gentiles together:

For he himself is our peace, who has made us both **one** (2:14) That “he might reconcile us both to God in **one** body through the cross (2:15).

Jesus is after more than coexistence; he is after oneness. But this will take a work of God—especially when uniting people as divided as Jew and Gentile. Paul focuses on how this oneness, this unity, is achieved in Eph 2:14-18, where the dominant theme is peace, a term used four times in these verses, where Jesus not only makes peace and brings peace, “he is himself our peace” (v.14).

We consider how Jesus brings peace that creates a new oneness in three ways: **(1) Beyond Coexistence to New Creation; (2) Beyond Law to Grace; (3) Beyond Absence to Presence**

I. Beyond COEXIST to New Creation

Text: Jesus is the actor throughout this passage, and he is making more than tolerant people. Jesus is making a new creation. This comes out especially in the language of “making” and “creating,”

For he himself is our peace, who has **made** us both one (v 14) that he might **create** in himself one new man in place of the two, so making peace (v 15)

Jesus is not creating a new idea, or a new technique for cultivating peace in your own life. He is creating a new humanity, a new people. Notice the phrases “one new man” and “one body,”

that he might create in himself **one new man** in place of the two, so making peace,¹⁶ and might reconcile us both to God **in one body** through the cross, thereby killing the hostility (vv 15-16).

“One new man” is literally “one new Anthropos;” it is a new humanity. And the phrase, “one body” in verse 16 does not refer to the physical body of Jesus, but to corporate body of Christ, the church. Paul uses “body” with this communal sense in Ephesians:

“God gave Christ as head over all things to the **church**, which is **his body** (1:23); “equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the **body of Christ**” (Eph 4:7, 12); “we are members of **his body**” (5:30).

This is a far more radical idea than coexistence requiring tolerance. This is a new creation, a new humanity, a new people.

A few things to notice at this point:

First, because the peace Jesus offers involves a new creation, then it will require new birth or conversion. In other words, this isn’t a peace technique that is applicable to all people—it is a peace for people who are, verse 15, “in him,” “that he might create **in himself** on new man.” Jesus is not building a community out of Jews and Gentiles who tolerate one another. He is building a community out of Christians. Some will be ethnically Jewish or ethnically Gentile, but their new and fundamental identity being “in Christ,” *Christian*. This means that when it comes to *Christian* peace-making, conversion (new birth) is essential.

Second, it means that Christians need to be careful not to separate their relationship with Jesus from their relationship with Jesus’ people. If Jesus is creating this new people “in himself,” and if it is “his body,” then how we treat this people is how we treat him.

Remember Paul, formerly Saul? He was violently persecuting the church. Then when Christ appeared to him, he said,

“Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?”⁵ And he said, “Who are you, Lord?” And he said, “I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting” (Acts 9:4-5).

Jesus identifies with his people. What you do to them; you do to him.

And remember, more positively, Jesus tells the parable about the end of time, when the righteous say to the king,

Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you drink? ... And the King will answer them, 'Truly, I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of these my brothers, you did it to me.' (see Matt 25:35-40).

That is the first point: the peace Jesus brings aims at more than coexistence; it is a new creation, a new people.

Second, in verses 14 and 15 Paul tells us some details about *how* Jesus brings about this new creation.

II. Beyond Law to Grace

The immediate context of our passage is Gentiles being outside of the people of God. In verses 11 and 12 Paul referred to them with words like “separated,” “alienated,” and “strangers,” all the language of outsiders. Israel represents people who are “inside” God’s family; the Gentiles are those who are outside.

A key marker of this separation was the **Law**. Paul speaks of the law with the image of a dividing wall of enmity in verses 14-15, saying that Christ

has broken down in his flesh the dividing wall of hostility ¹⁵ by abolishing the law of commandments expressed in ordinances, that he might create in himself one new man in place of the two (2:14-15).

God had given Israel the Law as a way for them to know how to obey him, how to be Holy. This simultaneously made plain how other nations were not obeying God. The hope was that in keeping the law, Israel would shine as a light, drawing other nations toward the true God. Instead, the law turned into a dividing wall, reinforcing Israel’s status as insiders with the rest outsiders. This created a sense of two types of humanity—those who were holy, chosen, inside God’s covenant; and those who were “separated,” “alienated,” “strangers.”

A few centuries before Jesus’ birth, a Jew living in Alexandria, Egypt said the following in a letter about the Law:

In his wisdom the Legislator ... surrounded us with unbroken palisades and iron walls to prevent our mixing with any of the other people in any matter, being thus kept pure in body and soul, preserved from false beliefs, and worshiping the only God omnipotent over all creation....¹

In Jesus’ day, a four-and-a-half-foot high wall surrounded the inner court of the Temple, separating Jews and Gentiles. Thirteen warnings were etched into the stone wall, two of which Archeologists have found. They read:

No foreigner is to enter within the forecourt and the balustrade around the sanctuary. Whoever is caught will have himself to blame for his subsequent death²

¹ *Letter of Aristeas*, 139-42, 3rd to 2nd century BC.

² Clinton Arnold, *Ephesians*, 159.

This wall—both figuratively as the law and literally as the stone barricade—meant no peace, no unity, between Jew and Gentile. But Paul says that Jesus has broken it down. What exactly does this mean?

We know that it doesn't mean that Jesus did away with the good essence of the law—like loving God and neighbor. Later in Ephesians Paul will quote one of the commandments as an ongoing, proper guide for how to live:

Children, obey your parents in the Lord, for this is right.² “Honor your father and mother” (this is the first commandment with a promise) (Eph 6:1-2).

One way to think about this is to see the law as becoming an *entry* way into God's people and keeping the standards of the law as the key status symbol of being God's people. God's people, then, are a law-based people—you are in, and you are one of them, based on your performance of the law.

What Jesus does on the Cross, is transform the way someone draws near to God and lives before God from a law-based system to a grace-based one. And this has implications for the type of community it forms.

Consider a very imperfect analogy: Imagine a university town. The university is old and prestigious. It was founded with a vision of blessing the whole community. It would provide a way for citizens to learn and grow and thereby lift the community up higher and higher.

But over time the university becomes a force of division—division between what some call “town and gown.” Here's what happened: the university had a type of law—let's call it the “law of admission.” To get in, one needed certain marks on their SAT and GPA; they needed to be from certain prep schools and families. Out at restaurants, you could sense the divide that was staring between the students and the locals—between elites and non-elites. Rather than lifting the whole community, the school's strict standards and law of admission, was creating a cultural divide.

Now imagine a remarkable man shows up in town. He is perfectly smart—he knows everything—and perfectly wise. He of course could meet every standard of the school and beyond—he was smarter than every professor and a master of every subject.

But seeing how the law of the school was dividing, he set up a new system. Anyone, from any background, could come to him to learn. There was only one admissions requirement: *total commitment to him*.

Because he was so brilliant, students from the prestigious school started flocking to him. And because he only demanded faithfulness, students from the less elite ranks were flocking to him as well.

Now notice: In doing away with the so-called law of admissions, this perfect teacher did not do away with the essence of the law of the education: he was still about becoming enlightened and growing. He simply reconfigured the so-called learning community around an entry point of *faith*

and grace: anyone who would come to him and put their trust in him, received the grace of being taught by him.

Something like this is happening in Jesus. He is not doing away with the righteousness of the Law—as though people no longer are to love God and love neighbor. What he is doing is removing the law in terms of a barrier to being in the people of God. Whereas the Jews were teaching that to be in the people of God you needed to first keep the law; Jesus was teaching that you simply needed to put your faith in him.

To bring peace between Jew and Gentile—and between all people—Jesus transforms the way of entry into good standing with God from *law* to *grace*, from performance to repentance.

A community that is built on performance—law keeping—tends to nurture pride and exclusiveness. But a community built on grace and forgiveness (the Cross), will nurture humility and love. Why? Because in the latter, you get in not by your good grades or good performance, but through admitting that you are a sinner, that you are needy, that you are helpless without God. This fosters a level playing floor that is low, not high.

Does our church give off an aroma of law keeping? What I mean by that is, do people who interact with us think that in order to be on the inside, you need to be talented, or successful, or somebody? One of the reasons we sing on Sunday, is because it shows that we worship something other than ourselves—we worship the Christ who broke down the wall so we could come inside—we sinners, we gentiles. One of the reasons we kneel for confession, is to make a physical statement that we got into this community through repentance, not performance.

When it comes to fostering unity and peace, education and legislation have their place in helping embattled people get along. But Jesus does not offer more law here. He does something more radical—he goes beyond law to grace.

So far, we have seen that Jesus creates oneness by bringing about a new creation and by founding a community around grace instead of law. One more thing to consider: Jesus' brings peace to this community by offering a peace that goes *beyond absence to presence*.

III. Beyond Absence to Presence

Peace, for Gentiles, was an important idea—especially in Paul's day. The *Pax Romana* heralded the way the Roman Empire brought about a time of cessation from war and conflict. Peace, for the Greek, emphasized absence—the absence of conflict, war, and economic strife.

The Hebrew idea of peace, *Shalom*, however, went deeper. It included absence of conflict, but also carried the sense of “completeness, fullness of health (including not just physical but also spiritual and mental health), and one's overall welfare.”³

And this is a peace that can only come through solving the deepest reason for humankind's restlessness—separation from God. This is a peace that requires more than absence; it requires presence. Which is exactly where Paul lands in verses 17-18:

³ Longenecker, *Romans*, 555–56

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 (2:17-18).

In verse 17, Paul draw from a verse in Isaiah 57, which reads:

Peace, peace, to the far and to the near," says the LORD, "and I will heal him. ²⁰ But the wicked are like the tossing sea; for it cannot be quiet, and its waters toss up mire and dirt. ²¹ There is no peace," says my God, "for the wicked." (Isa 57:19-21)

Did you catch the image? The image of the wicked who know no peace. They are like, Isaiah says, "the tossing sea; for it cannot be quiet, and its waters toss up mire and dirt."

Scripture sometimes likeness the human heart to liquid rather than a solid—it is volatile, capricious, moveable: "The king's heart is a stream of water in the hand of the LORD; he turns it wherever he will" (Prov 21:1); "the purpose in man's heart is like deep water" (Prov 20:5); "the **hearts** of the people melted and became **like water**" (Joshua 7:5, NIV).

It is a good image, for our hearts often feel like anything but solid ground. They feel like the ocean, constantly in motion, tossing, churning. Like the ocean, our hearts are affected by myriad forces. Think of the ocean: its waters constantly pulled and tossed by the gravitational pull of the moon, by the magnetic force at the heart of the earth, by the turning of the earth, by the winds and gals. These forces affect the waters unlike the solid ground.

Are our hearts not like this—like the "tossing sea" that cannot be quieted, as Isaiah reads.⁴

Where does man go to still this sea? What is the cause of its restlessness.

The great **Saint Augustine** put it so well: "Thou hast made us for thyself, O Lord, and our heart is restless until it rests in thee."

It is only in being reconciled to God—to be presented to him with our sins forgiven, as his son or daughter—that our hearts can find peace. It is not the absence of conflict or trouble that we wait for to calm our hearts; it is the presence of our Lord, who can calm the sea.

It is striking to me, that Paul closes his thought by referring to God as father. Earlier he has said that Jesus "reconciles us both to God" (v 16); but here, he uses the more familial term: "through [Christ] we both have access in one Spirit to the Father (2:17-18).

Two implications to note:

First, this reminds each of us that peace is not merely the absence of bad feelings or hard circumstances: peace is the presence of our heavenly Father. And we have access to that Presence through the "man of peace," Jesus Christ—he takes our hand and leads us to his father.

⁴ For a similar image, see Martyn Lloyd-Jones, "God's Way of Reconciliation," page 327.

Secondly, as Jew and Gentile draw near to One Father, it will draw them closer as brothers and sister. The unity and oneness deepen, as Christ gives the both of us, Jew and Gentile, access in the Spirit to the Father.

The New Testament is not naïve about the difficulty of maintaining this peace within the church. Most of Paul's letters are written in response to division and conflict in these new communities. Even while Christ has achieved our new status as at peace with God, and as brothers and sisters before this same father, it takes time to appropriate—to move from status to experience.

Christians need time to grow, and thus Paul is here writing to remind them of their new identity, their new community, their new source of power and life. And he is thereby challenging them to step up: to treat their community like the new creation it is, to not only seek peace with the Father, but peace with one another.

For Paul's first readers, peace would have called to mind the peace of Rome—the Pax Romana—first brought to the world by Caesar Augustus himself. And in a great irony, maintaining that peace was the reason for crucifying Jesus, whose death would provide the true way of peace. But impossible to miss, is that while the peace of Rome was established and maintained by force, the peace of God is established and maintained by Christ—"he is our peace"—, who can offer to any nation, and people, an entirely new way of being human, and a new access to the Father, even the Father of peace.

Small Groups Questions

What does Ephesians 2:14-18 teach us about Christ's role in unity?

What are common barriers in today's culture that prevent unity? What barriers does Christ break down to help the unity of a local church? Do we try to re-erect these barriers?

What is the difference between coexistence and the "oneness" Jesus is after? Why is coexistence not enough for Christians?

Can you think of a time when you settled for mere coexistence rather than working for unity? Sometimes in a fallen and broken world coexistence is all we can achieve. Perhaps you can pray for an area of your life where you have not been able to move past coexistence to deeper unity.

How can the message of the cross help you overcome separation in a Christian relationship this week?

Take some time to pray for God to help our church become more and more a place where Jesus Christ "is our peace" (Eph 2:14).