

CHRIS, OUR PEACE (2:11–22)

¹¹ Therefore, remember that formerly you who are Gentiles by birth and called “uncircumcised” by those who call p 71 themselves “the circumcision” (which is done in the body by human hands)—¹² remember that at that time you were separate from Christ, excluded from citizenship in Israel and foreigners to the covenants of the promise, without hope and without God in the world. ¹³ But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far away have been brought near by the blood of Christ. ¹⁴ For he himself is our peace, who has made the two one and has destroyed the barrier, the dividing wall of hostility, ¹⁵ by setting aside in his flesh the law with its commands and regulations. His purpose was to create in himself one new humanity out of the two, thus making peace, ¹⁶ and in one body to reconcile both of them to God through the cross, by which he put to death their hostility. ¹⁷ He came and preached peace to you who were far away and peace to those who were near. ¹⁸ For through him we both have access to the Father by one Spirit. ¹⁹ Consequently, you are no longer foreigners and strangers, but fellow citizens with God’s people and also members of his household, ²⁰ built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the chief cornerstone. ²¹ In him the whole building is joined together and rises to become a holy temple in the Lord. ²² And in him you too are being built together to become a dwelling in which God lives by his Spirit.

In the second half of the chapter, Paul identifies two consequences of his previous declarations that believers (Jew and Gentile) are God’s masterpiece. Both these statements are introduced by “therefore” (2:11, 19). The claims made are further elaborated upon in 2:14–18, which discusses how it is that Gentiles and Jews share in Christ. Paul’s

argument is more explicit and detailed here than at the beginning of the chapter, for he further defines both humanity’s situation and Christ’s role in God’s salvation plan. To capture these twin emphases, we will look first at Paul’s argument concerning Jews and Gentiles in 2:11–13, 19–22 and then focus on 2:14–18.

p 72 No Longer Strangers (2:11–13, 19–22)

Paul addresses the Ephesians directly by asking them to recall their lives before they heard the gospel message. Certain things were true, including that they were without God (2:12), although clearly most of them would have at that time retorted that they were devoted to their gods. But from Paul’s (and any Jew’s) perspective, Gentiles in the main did not forsake idolatry; they lived without recognizing God in their everyday lives. Again, they were strangers to all that true knowledge of God offered, including the covenants of the promise, the hope that only God brings; they were outside the community that bears God’s revelation to the world. Paul describes it as alienated from the citizenship of Israel (2:12). This unique phrase is rich with subtle meaning. First, the term “citizenship” is used elsewhere only in Phil 3:20 (using a cognate term), where Paul contrasts the believer’s loyalty to God and his promises of a new heavens and earth, not to earthly things which have about them the stench of death. Paul is hinting at the same truth here, that citizenship within Israel is membership into God’s family. Second, Paul uses “Israel” in a specific sense here, focusing on the spiritual Israel, those Jews who know the covenants, the promise and the hope of God. Paul divides Jews into those who are circumcised in the flesh, and those who are circumcised also in the heart (see Jer 9:25). He reminds the Ephesians that they are called the uncircumcised, but that this label has been given to them by those who see things from a fleshly perspective, not those who understand that true circumcision is that which is done to the heart.

But the Gentile Ephesians remain no longer in their former state, for in Christ they are now close to God, they are now fellow citizens with the saints, they are full members of God’s family, they are building pieces of God’s holy temple (2:13, 19–22). Each of these images brings depth to our understanding of the Christian life. Paul declares that they are no longer outsiders, but are part of the

community of saints. Because he speaks here of being fellow citizens, it is likely that the term “saints” is parallel to “Israel” in 2:12. The riches of God’s kingdom life, and fellowship with those who worship the one true God, are now counted as well to Gentiles in Christ.

p 73 Fusing the Horizons: Citizenship

I take my U.S. citizenship for granted; I was born with it, did nothing to earn it.² Sometimes I forget that it offers certain privileges and constitutional rights. Citizenship in the ancient world was not taken for granted, indeed, it was highly prized, for few enjoyed it. Having citizenship was a way to show loyalty to Rome, and it gave Rome the opportunity to reward those who showed allegiance. Julius Caesar started an aggressive program of granting citizenship to aliens/*peregrini*. He gave Sicily Latin rights, very similar to Roman citizenship. And he would grant Roman citizenship to whole legions of *peregrini* (foreigners) as a way to enfranchise them and give them a stake in the republic. Augustus and Claudius continued the trend of offering citizenship to more groups. By 212 CE, Emperor Caracalla gave Roman citizenship to all free people in the empire.

Among the privileges of Roman citizenship was that of *conubium*, or the right to enter a licit marriage, giving offspring the rank of Roman citizen, and claim to the father’s estate. Additionally, Roman citizens had the right of *jus commercii* (to own and sell property outright), and had access to Roman courts. Citizens were not to be beaten or tortured before a trial. While both women and men enjoyed these privileges, the latter benefitted from the additional rights of voting, joining the Roman legion, and holding public office. A registry of citizens’ names was kept in Rome and updated approximately every five years, coordinated with the census. The names of freed slaves would be recorded in the local registry with copies sent to Rome. Similarly, a child born to a citizen would be registered within thirty days of birth, and a personal copy could be kept at their home. The official document was held in the city’s public archives and perhaps in Rome as well.

² Citizenship in the community of ancient Israel was similar in that it was the birthright of every Israelite to be a member of God’s household, a part of the

How did one become a citizen? One could be born a citizen, as was Paul. Or one could purchase the privilege, as did Claudius Lysias, the tribune who questioned Paul in Jerusalem (Acts 22:26–29; 23:26). One could bribe officials to have their name placed on a list of potential citizens going up for nomination. And one could receive citizenship upon manumission from p 74 slavery. It is this last option that I think might resonate with Paul’s metaphorical use of citizenship and slavery in his writings. Paul notes that believers are free—free from the deathly grip of sin, free from the power of the flesh, free from the constraints and restrictions of the law. Like a manumitted slave, believers now enjoy the privileges of citizenship.

We do not know how many of the Ephesian and Philippian Christians were citizens of their cities or of Rome. Philippi was a Roman colony, and many veterans with their Roman citizenship settled there. Whether these men or their families were Christian is unclear, but probably unlikely. Thus, for believers to be part of God’s commonwealth, a citizen of an eternal kingdom, was good news indeed. It should be good news as well today, and the church has a special contribution to make in the conversation of citizenship. Concerning immigration and illegal aliens, the church has an opportunity to develop these hot-button issues beyond the contexts of (alleged) increased crime or jobs lost to citizens. We can critique earthly citizenship when it privileges one group over another, and we can celebrate with believers from around the globe a single citizenship in the commonwealth of God’s kingdom. Paul used his Roman citizenship to advance the gospel, not to further his own rights. As he notes in his letter to the Ephesians, he is chained to a Roman soldier (3:1; 4:1; 6:20); with a single word denying Christ, Paul would be a free man with all the privileges and honor that his Roman citizenship carries. Instead, he sees his Roman citizenship as an opportunity to introduce Jesus and his eternal citizenship to as many people as would listen. He held his Roman citizenship lightly because he knew it was of the present age which is passing away. He clung to his citizenship in heaven, knowing it would outlast time.

covenant community. The gospel invites Gentiles in Christ to be full members of the new community of God’s people.

In celebrating the new life in Christ, Paul draws on Isaiah's promise (Isa 57:19), which pictures God's peace extended to the lowly and contrite, whether near or far. Isaiah warns, however, that the wicked will have no peace. It is perhaps no accident that after declaring that those far off have been brought near through Christ's blood (see also 1:7), Paul's next statement is that Christ is our peace.

He Is Our Peace (2:14–18)

What does it mean that Christ is our peace? Note that Paul does not say that Christ is “your” peace, as though Christ's work is sufficient or necessary **p 75** only for Gentiles. Rather, Christ's work is effective for both Jew and Gentile. Both Jew and Gentile are necessary for us to understand the full ramifications of Christ's work. For Paul, Christ takes two entities and makes them one new thing. This happens in nature when an egg and a sperm meet and create something new. We see it in the description of marriage in Gen 2:24, that a woman and a man come together in marriage and are then legally and socially a new entity (5:29–32, see also 1 Cor 6:16). We must avoid concluding that Christ acts as a United Nations negotiator who keeps two countries or factions from fighting. This scenario assumes a power differential that manages to keep chaos at bay. Additionally, the difference represented in the Jews and Gentiles is not merely a tribal, ethnic, or a national struggle, but a spiritual struggle centering on the identity of the people of God. The peace that Christ brings is not the absence of hostilities, or even the willingness to tolerate the other. In Christ, there is no “other.”

The term “peace” is complex, having a range of meaning. The context is crucial. In the New Testament it can mean an absence of war (Rev 6:4) or calmness of mind (Col 3:15); or it can identify a characteristic of God, “God of peace” (Rom 15:33), “peace of Christ” (Col 3:15); or it can name a fruit of the Spirit (Gal 5:22–23). Paul's greetings include his wish that his readers experience the grace and peace of God. Paul explains in Rom 5:1 that we have peace with God, having been justified through the death and resurrection of the Lord Jesus (Rom 4:25). Such good news is expressed in the Gospels as well. Luke records the angels' song at Jesus' birth that proclaims peace on earth (Luke 2:14). Jesus declared in the Beatitudes that

peacemakers are blessed; they will be called the children of God (Matt 5:9). In John's Gospel, Jesus pronounces that he brings peace, and that in him is peace (16:33; 14:27). Again, and not without irony, Peter declares to Cornelius, a Roman centurion who makes his living as a soldier, that the gospel is the good news of peace through Jesus Christ which God sent to his people Israel (Acts 10:36). In Ephesians, “peace” is declared, for the hostilities between Jew and Gentile have been stilled in Christ—the two are now one. And this is not only in personal attitude or individual actions; peace is to be a lived reality as the church gathers in one place to worship the one Lord. As our peace, Christ makes Gentiles fellow heirs, fellow citizens with Jews in God's commonwealth.

One final note—a question really. Why did not Paul write that Christ is our salvation? Surely that is what he meant, right? Once again, however, **p 76** Paul is encouraging his readers to take in the full effect of their reconciliation through Christ's cross. Salvation is not simply a vertical relationship between God and humans that is restored and enhanced, to which an ultimately optional horizontal aspect is added. This false dichotomy separates what in Paul's mind is a unity.³ The relationship believers have with God in Christ is evidenced by living the new creation life here and now. No new creation, no reconciliation. God is intent on redeeming and reconciling all creation, including his image bearers (humans) who by faith are in Christ.

Christ Breaks Down the Dividing Wall

Paul builds his argument by explaining that Christ has done three things: he has made the two one, he has broken down the dividing wall, and he has annulled the law of the commandments. Taking a closer look at these accomplishments, we can be comfortably sure that the two entities made one are Jew and Gentile, but the dividing wall is more difficult to interpret. Perhaps Paul is constructing a metaphor that will interact with a second picture at the end of the chapter, namely the building up of God's temple (2:21–22). It is also possible that Paul is alluding to the wall of separation in the Jerusalem temple. The difficulty is that Paul uses two terms for this wall; he speaks of the middle wall of the fence, wall, or barrier. Why use such an elaborate

³ Wright 2009: 126–27.

phrase? Perhaps it is referencing a specific image, such as the barrier that excludes Gentiles from the Jewish area of the temple. This wall was in the midst of the temple precinct, hence it might be described as a “middle wall.” It also served as a barrier or fence to keep out the ritually unclean (Gentiles) from a pure, sacred space reserved for Jews.⁴

Although this wall still stood in Paul’s day, he insists that in Christ both Jew and Gentile have full access to God. Paul probably preached something of the sort, if accusations against him are anything to go on. In Acts 21:28–29, certain Jews from the province of Asia (Ephesus is located here) accuse Paul of bringing Greeks into the temple, thereby defiling it. Since Gentiles were permitted in the outer court of the temple, the accusation must be alleging that Paul took Gentiles beyond the barrier. Such an [p 77](#) act would have resulted in the defiling Gentile’s death. Why might such an accusation be leveled against Paul, unless he in fact taught that in Christ no barrier existed? I am not suggesting that Paul violated the temple or would put at risk one of his fellow believers. But in his teachings, it is likely that Paul contrasted the physical barriers of the Jerusalem temple with what all believers now have in Christ, namely full access to the Father through the blood of the Son. Nor am I suggesting that Paul wants to give Gentiles the same access to the temple as the Jews had—this was the mistake made by his accusers, and reveals their narrow vision. Paul does not promote equal opportunity for Gentiles, for that would tacitly accept the present system with minor (though important) variations. In Christ, the entire system of Law, temple, and sacrifice is rendered obsolete. The point is that a new person now exists where once there was Jew and Gentile. The promises of God have their fulfillment. The new person is a preview of the new creation, the new heavens and new earth. With Christ’s death and resurrection, with the filling of the Spirit, the believer is now part of the new creation.

The Term “Hostility” in Paul’s Argument

Equally difficult to understand is Paul’s comment concerning the law of the commandments in ordinances, and its relationship to what precedes it: “the hostility in his flesh.” We are left to decide

Paul’s intentions based on grammar rules, which can be broken. Certain questions need answered, including whether the term “hostility” should be understood to explain the dividing wall and whether this wall was broken in his flesh, or whether the law was abolished in his flesh. Additionally, we must explore why Paul described the law with further qualifiers “commands” and “regulations.”

To the first set of issues, the questions revolve around whether the phrase “the hostility in his flesh” connects with the previous participle “having broken down” or with the following participle “having annulled or abrogated.” One possible reading is to connect “hostility” with the preceding dividing wall as a further descriptor. This hostility would then be destroyed or broken down. However, it is not typical for modifiers to be on both sides of a participle. This implies a second, more likely reading, where “hostility” would further define the law of the commandments. A related question is the place of the phrase “in his flesh.” It might refer back [p 78](#) to the dividing wall which was destroyed “in his flesh.” But that syntax is awkward. Additionally, some argue that to say Christ’s work in the flesh destroyed enmity between Jew and Gentile is too narrow an interpretation of Christ’s death. However, as I noted above, Paul understands reconciliation with God and new creation as two sides of the same coin, both gained through Christ’s death and resurrection. Nonetheless, it makes most sense to include “in his flesh” with the abrogation of the law, the third participle in the grouping. In sum, we suggest that both “hostility” and “in his flesh” are connected with the annulment of the law. Paul is thus arguing that the hostility between Jews and Gentiles that is generated by the law (more on this below) is annulled or made inoperative in Christ’s flesh, probably referring to his death on the cross (2:13).

Why does Paul qualify the noun “law” with the phrase “with its commands and regulations”? It is historically anachronistic to divide the law into moral and ceremonial categories; Paul would not have been thinking in such terms. However, if the dividing wall points metaphorically to the temple barrier, then the law of commandments in ordinances might also speak to those decrees in particular that limit Jew/Gentile interaction,

⁴ Josephus *Ant.* 15.417.

namely circumcision (mentioned in 2:11) and food laws (see Gal 2:12–13) and even Sabbath (as in Rom 14:5–6). These rites which create barriers between Jew and Gentile do not qualify as the covenants of the promise (2:12). Again, Paul claims to the Galatians that if the Gentile men among them get circumcised, then they are obliged to keep the entire law (Gal 5:3). Less likely is the possibility that the term “regulations” does not go with commandments, but is contrasted to them. Thus Paul would be arguing that in Christ’s ordinances, the law of the commandments has been annulled, similar to his argument in 2 Cor 3:7–18, which contrasts the written code and the ministry of the Spirit.⁵

In any case, what is clear is that the law no longer has the power to divide. Moreover, Christ’s purpose is to make something new from what were once two. This new thing is his body, the church, which now has access in Christ to God the Father through the Spirit. The cross is not only the place where believers’ sins are forgiven, but also the place where something new is created. The new creation is not simply a new individual, but a new entity—Christ’s body, the church. As noted above, this new entity can be described as God’s household and God’s temple [p 79](#) where his Spirit dwells. This amazing reality is especially poignant to Paul, because he wears chains testifying to its truthfulness. In the next chapter Paul puts his own situation into perspective, given the surpassing greatness of the reality he and all believers share in Christ through the Spirit to God the Father.

⁵ Heine 2002: 135–36, quoting Origen.