

**The gospel unifies those that are different for the glory of Jesus.**

**Ephesians 2:11–22** “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—[12] 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. [13] But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ. [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 [15] 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, [16] and might reconcile us both to God in one body through the cross, thereby killing the hostility. [17] 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. [19] So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God, [20] built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus himself being the cornerstone, [21] in whom the whole structure, being joined together, grows into a holy temple in the Lord. [22] In him you also are being built together into a dwelling place for God by the Spirit. (ESV)

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The church, the body, is one in Christ.

Having lived in Washington, D.C. you come to be grateful for the regular access to some of the finest museums. Collections of history and art that mark human flourishing, struggle, pain, and hope. But my favorite of the Smithsonian museums is the Portrait Gallery.

The vast collection of the artistically captured images of humanity. Some works more striking than others... walking the halls was often a reprieve for me, a place of rest and contemplation as the essence of humanity is presented for all to see, for all of history. My love of that place has extended into a fascination with

colorized historic photos/portraits. Ancient images brought to life with ink and pigment.

Each work marking a moment, a memory, a way of life intended to be shown and perhaps cherished.

The church shares this intention. We are, as the body of Christ, the image of the kingdom of God in our day, we are the portraits capturing the essence of God's plan and promise of reconciliation.

To that end we have taken the month of May to uncover some of the brush strokes of our painting. This Body Life series, collecting hints of what the church is meant to be. The body is led, gathered, honest, and formed. More could be added, this series is not exhaustive but these elements are important.

Today, the Body is Different. What do I mean by that? Certainly we are different from the world, in what we find hope in, in what we value. But what I hope we will see today is that as the body of Christ we are made up of on-purpose people with difference - and they are differences that don't end when we become part of the body.

Our text is a bit of Paul's letter to the Ephesian church. Written likely from imprisonment in Rome around 62 AD, Paul is writing to the expanded church that he helped found. He spent years among the earliest members of the church and he cares deeply for them and those that have been added to their number.

There are two main themes of Ephesians: (1) Christ has reconciled all creation to himself and to God, and (2) Christ has united people from all nations to himself and to one another in his church.

There doesn't seem to be a specific occasion that necessitated the letter but we can glean from it the ongoing struggle of reconciliation among the people of God.

In this section of the letter it is clear that the church is unified in Christ, yet still different in Christ while it grows always rooted in Christ.

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## Unified in Christ

‘Remember at one time you Gentiles were outsiders because you couldn’t match the image of Israel making you aliens without hope and without God.’

The audience here is primarily non-Jewish in ancestry and experience. And for a long time in the church that was a problem for many people. But Paul captures the reality that apart from Christ there is no belonging, no people to be part of. Where as Jews were children of covenant promise, everyone else (Gentiles) were out.

This distinction lingers in the church as Paul writes, and rages all the more as we turn to study Galatians. Difference breeds hostility... from Babel where language was confused to spread humanity afar. Different language, different homeland, different allegiances, these things have always, in a humanity tainted by sin from the garden to today, fostered hostility among the different. This is what was being experienced in the early church among Jewish believers and Gentile believers.

Not unlike the types of difference we experience in the church today. Ethnic, socioeconomic, philosophical.

But in Christ, those with no expectation of access to God are brought near.

**Ephesians 2:13–14** “But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ. [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” (ESV)

By the gospel, the good news of the work of Jesus, his blood shed, not only are different brought together, the hostility ends. By abolishing the law of commandments (meaning you don’t have to be circumcised) and by granting forgiveness and righteousness on the basis of his obedience and sacrifice, Jesus creates in the church a unified identity reconciling Jews and Gentiles alike to God and each other.

The grace of Christ does violence against every “ism” done to divide humanity, every attempt to fence in and out certain people from reconciliation with God. And more than just killing the hostility, Jesus brings different together.

**Ephesians 2:18–19** “For through him we both have access in one Spirit to the Father. [19] So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God,” (ESV)

Unified by the truth proclaimed, by the transformative work of the Spirit among the church. No longer strangers, outsiders, now fellow citizens of Christ’s kingdom.

And this isn’t just for the church in and around Ephesus. This is the way of Christianity. The gospel is a message of reconciliation, between God and humanity, and human to human.

**2 Corinthians 5:17–19** “Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come. [18] All this is from God, who through Christ reconciled us to himself and gave us the ministry of reconciliation; [19] that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting to us the message of reconciliation.” (ESV)

He who knew no sin was made sin so that we might be the righteousness of God. And our reconciliation among each other - across lines everyone else says should separate - reveals that the gospel is true.

And the implications/fruit of that message create the church.

If we think of the church as a salad bowl full of bright and different ingredients. Grace makes people in the salad bowl comfortable with one another. Jesus is our peace. Not our majority status or our reigning preferences.

The church then must be the leading example of ethnic, economic and political differences coming together in worship and pursuit of Jesus and his way. It is a reordering of our experience to present a glimpse of the kingdom to the world.

A new household - family of those near and far by the blood of Christ. It teaches and frees us to value each other. To see the family resemblance and love/care where there was once indifference, distrust, or hatred.

As we continue in the way of Jesus, the Spirit may also awaken us to ways we have frequented in hostility and bring us to repentance.

***Be unified*** - When we recognize the remains of hostility for difference, remember that it was killed upon the cross and his kingdom speaks a better word to us. Repent where you need to, reach out where you need to, stand with your brothers and sisters in Christ.

We rejoice in how the Lord has built Reservoir, a multiethnic church, increasingly representative of the community we find ourselves in... proving the gospel is true, reconciliation is real. Jesus unifies those that are different.

But being unified in Christ is just half of the battle against hostility.

### **Still Different in Christ**

Did you notice what Paul doesn't say - "remember when you were Gentiles" as if we have lost the distinction. We are made citizens, a new man in Christ, but we still maintain our Gentileness. One in Christ, still Asian, still cuacasian, still maintaining different perspectives on education, politics... Submitting all those things to Christ and his reign, but most still part of the mix.

In the fullness of time Jesus died for sinners and you better believe the location and timing was on purpose. Jesus ministered and the church bloomed in an era of thorough difference - the Roman world was a blending of different, skin tone, dialect, economy, ethnicity, class. And while Scripture calls believers out of sin and some of the things the world claims as identity, it never calls for a removal of God-given uniqueness or difference.

Still the power of the gospel saves and unifies those that are meant to be seen not assimilated. The modern church is tricky because we love diversity but strive for conformity or uniformity instead of unity. So called "churches" even grow when it happens. Come as you are, as long as you conform to our preference of worship style and expressiveness. Come as you are, as long as you vote republican in the next election. Come as you are as long as you educate your children in our preferred way.

For Star Trek fans, it is like the church has become the Borg - you will be assimilated and resistance is futile.

Some of us were even raised to assimilate to the dominant culture as fast as we could for success and maybe we bring that into the experience of church.

I get it. It is far easier to hang with people who have the same experience as me, whose perspectives match mine. But we cheapen and neglect the gospel when it is those things that unite us and not the work of Jesus on the cross for us.

It is also difficult for many of us because we came up in a strange time where being “colorblind” was the way forward. Pretend as if you can’t even notice difference... The challenge is, even if we articulate this posture we are lying.

We say, well look at children, they don’t see color in each other. They absolutely see difference, they just don’t care about it! We are the ones who raise them to negatively recognize difference.

We even try to use Scripture to blanch out difference.

**Galatians 3:28–29** “There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is no male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus. [29] And if you are Christ’s, then you are Abraham’s offspring, heirs according to promise.” (ESV)

“See, in Christ there is no distinction!” Absolutely, no distinction that keeps us from being in, being saved and formed into family. But we abuse the text when we strip ethnicity away with it, but we somehow learn to maintain gender distinctions...

“When one person tells a person of another ethnicity, “I don’t see color,” they might as well be saying, “I don’t see that part of you that is incredibly important to you and your culture, your family history, your life experience, and your personal identity.” This is the equivalent of saying, “I don’t see you”—intended or not...God calls attention to our ethnic and cultural differences in order to demonstrate the unifying power of Christ and his gospel. We are not the same. We are different. And that’s what makes our unity in Christ all the more glorious.” Cole Brown

This is Paul, the apostle who becomes all things to all people so that some might be saved, he doesn't require all people to become the same other than repentant people in need of a Savior.

The Kingdom of Christ is a mosaic of difference shaped into beauty. The unifying work of the gospel not robbing us of experience or existence but highlighting it for the glory of Jesus. It is the image that is painted throughout Scripture.

“In the pagan vision of identity, there is union without distinction; in the deist vision of alterity, there is distinction without union. But in the Christian vision of complementarity, there is union and distinction, same and other, many and one.”  
Andrew Wilson

Citizen status gained by the work of Jesus not our ability to shed what makes us different. But to be ourselves, made clean and part of the family by his blood.

Leaves us learning to surrender our preference on some things, to serve each other. Expanding our perspectives as we value the difference of our family, able to see things through each other's eyes and experiences.

There is a spectrum of difference, and it will look different depending on where the church exists (made up of those around us). But what a gift it is to live in the US at this moment. We are arguably most poised to look like Rome, varied, different, an opportunity for the Kingdom to be revealed in a mighty way, if we have eyes to see it.

Jesus frees us to not only value each other but to see each other in our difference. To celebrate it. To learn from it. As the church then we are also able in our seeing to weep with those who weep, mourning things I may never experience because my brother has... No one invisible, all flourishing, finding their place in the household of faith.

“The success of a church is first determined by how many invisible people become visible to those not like them.” Scot McKnight

***Be different*** - Be honest, be seen, look for it among us and fight for it that the world will see the message of reconciliation unfolding in us.

See others because you have been seen by Jesus - all of you - and he claimed you for his family, to be part of his kingdom with what you bring to the table paired with what everyone else brings.

Unified in Christ while still different in Christ. It is the family that grows and it is in Christ!

## **Rooted in Christ**

We bring our unity and our difference - navigating it all while clinging to Jesus.

For he himself is our peace... **Ephesians 2:17** “And he came and preached peace to you who were far off and peace to those who were near.” (ESV)

Likewise, we preach his peace, we anchor ourselves in it and live his way with hope and we are built.

**Ephesians 2:20–22** “...built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus himself being the cornerstone, [21] in whom the whole structure, being joined together, grows into a holy temple in the Lord. [22] In him you also are being built together into a dwelling place for God by the Spirit.” (ESV)

A holy temple, built together as a dwelling place for God. Apart from Jesus this is impossible. He has claimed misfits from every corner, from every experience, and he gives us life in him, and life together. What a glorious gift.

In Christ, believing in his life, death, resurrection and kingdom, we can be unified and in Christ we can be different. It brings him glory. We must be about this. We must value each other, and see each other. Because we have been so valued and seen by Jesus. We keep looking to him.

“Getting the church right is so important. This is God’s world-changing social experiment of bringing unlikes and differentials to the table to share life with one another as a new kind of family. When this happens, we show the world what love, justice, peace, reconciliation, and life together are designed by God to be.



The church is God's show-and-tell for the world to see how God wants us to live as a family." Scot McKnight, *A Fellowship of Differents*

We are the Portrait Gallery for the Kingdom, the beautiful image of unity and formation in Christ. We are the old photos given vibrancy with color that new generations will be drawn to the source of life.

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Here's the thing, we celebrate the difference in our church, but it is all the work of the Spirit (and Janice).

As I have studied and prayed I want you to know that I have had to repent. For the ways I haven't valued or seen members of the household of God. For the ways I have let prejudice color my perspective. Decisions I have made without regard for the body the Spirit has formed. And by God's grace I want to do better. To value, to see, and to cling to Christ together.

Maybe that is for you too.

We exist as the church for his glory and in him, together we flourish.

And together we are headed home...

**Revelation 7:9–11** "After this I looked, and behold, a great multitude that no one could number, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, clothed in white robes, with palm branches in their hands, [10] and crying out with a loud voice, "Salvation belongs to our God who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb!" [11] And all the angels were standing around the throne and around the elders and the four living creatures, and they fell on their faces before the throne and worshiped God," (ESV)

May it be so with us.