

# **One New Humanity**

Ephesians 2:13-22

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According to the prominent scholar N. T. Wright the meaning of this passage is essential to understand the will and work of God, for this passage in Ephesians informs us that God, through Jesus, is reconciling the divisions that have separated Jews and Gentiles, that the church is supposed to be a place where these racial, cultural, national, even religious divisions are broken down so that healing, reconciliation, and unity might result. By forming this new global community, the church, an entity that breaks down boundaries and brings people of all types together, God is declaring the defeat of the powers-that-be who attempt to divide and exclude us from one another through fear and violence. This new community, the church, is an alternative politics, representing how human society ought to be organized. The alternative politics which the church embodies and advocates for is essential to the salvation of humanity. Thus our salvation can only be fully achieved when we are God's agents of reconciliation, breaking down racial, religious, national, and cultural boundaries, uniting all people together in one common, new humanity.

It's really as simple as that.

And yet fear and uncertainty of the stranger abound in this age of terror and mass murder. And these fears and anxieties are dangerous. These fears open us up to be seduced by the temptation to support a politics of division instead of the church's politics of forgiveness and reconciliation. Fear of refugees and immigrants, hatred of Muslims, the refusal to hear the cries of racial injustice from our black sisters and brothers are all signs of the sinfulness Paul is preaching against in the letter to the Ephesians. They are contrary to God's will and work. They are antithetical to the mission of the Christian church. The church must bear witness to the wider world by living as a people of forgiveness, of compassion, of welcome, of trust.

The Russian theologian Sergius Bulgakov wrote that "the destiny of everyone is connected with the destiny of all; everyone is responsible for all," which is why he rejected all notions of individual salvation. Either all humanity together is saved or all humanity together is lost. If we think we can be reconciled to God without doing the very difficult work of becoming reconciled to all humanity, then we are sorely mistaken.

And there is no better day to remind us of these Gospel truths than World Communion Sunday, when we celebrate our connections with all humanity through space and time in the Body of Christ.

The Orthodox churches have long understood communion, the Eucharist, as not simply some ritual of worship which arose within the early Christian churches, but communion as the

event with constitutes the very being of the church. The Greek theologian John Zizioulas even goes so far as to say that communion gives us our fundamental insight into the nature of reality—that existence must be conceived as an act of communion. Our personhood is a relational personhood. We cannot be ourselves except in a relation of communion with others. This is true even of God. Zizioulas wrote, “The being of God is relational being: without the concept of communion it would not be possible to speak of the being of God.”

Communion reveals to us the nature of reality and calls us to live in agreement with reality. Sin is the attempt to live contrary to reality, to break the bonds that unite us with God and with one another.

In 1982 various expressions of the Christian faith—Catholic, Orthodox, Protestant, and Evangelical—settled many of their centuries-old disputes by agreeing to the document *Baptism, Eucharist, and Ministry*, an excerpt of which was read a moment ago. This agreement itself is an embodiment of the idea of communion, an attempt to break down barriers, be reconciled, and find unity.

The document expresses the varied and rich meanings one should draw from the Christian teaching of the Eucharist. On this World Communion Sunday, we draw our attention to the places in which the document speaks about our global relationships. And so it states,

All kinds of injustice, racism, separation and lack of freedom are radically challenged when we share in the body and blood of Christ. Through the eucharist the all-renewing grace of God penetrates and restores human personality and dignity.

The document makes clear that while reconciliation is an act of the Holy Spirit, we in the church are the embodiment of the Spirit’s power, responsible for carrying out God’s work. It proclaims:

As participants in the eucharist, therefore, we prove inconsistent if we are not actively participating in this ongoing restoration of the world’s situation and the human condition.

Communion, therefore, leads to mission. We don’t simply engage in a solemn and meaningful ritual that nourishes us. Communion does do that, but it then leads us out into the world. Pope John Paul II declared that we should never forget that communion “is always in some way celebrated on the altar of the world.”

*Baptism, Eucharist, and Ministry* makes clear this connection to mission.

As it is entirely the gift of God, the eucharist brings into the present age a new reality which transforms Christians into the image of Christ and therefore makes them his effective witnesses. The eucharist is precious food for missionaries, bread and wine for pilgrims on their apostolic journey. The eucharistic community is nourished and strengthened for confessing by word and action the Lord Jesus Christ who gave his life for the salvation of the world. As it becomes one people, sharing the meal of the one Lord, the eucharistic assembly must be concerned for gathering also those who are at present beyond its visible limits, because Christ invited to his feast all for whom he died.

Insofar as Christians cannot unite in full fellowship around the same table to eat the same loaf and drink from the same cup, their missionary witness is weakened at both the individual and the corporate levels.

We have a responsibility to be missionaries to the world, breaking down barriers, inviting all people to share our common humanity, and communion is the meal that nourishes us in this endeavor. If we fail to live in communion with everyone, then our witness for God is diminished. Which is one of the many reasons that we must try ever so diligently to listen to one another and to maintain relationship with one another, especially when we disagree.

And so in this age of terror and mass murder, of bitter partisan divisions, of difficulty listening and hearing one another, we might be wondering who we are.

Our membership in the church, the Body of Christ, allows us to answer that question with confidence. We are God's agents of reconciliation, breaking down racial, religious, national, and cultural boundaries, uniting all people together in one common, new humanity.