



Central
Peninsula
Church

...to make and mature more followers of Christ

Trending Now: Race

Ephesians 2:11–22

Rob Hall

June 26, 2016

series: Trending Now

Well over 16 years ago, my sociologist professor, who was African American, said something I never forgot, “Race is and will be the number one issue America faces.” It’s been almost two decades since he made that statement in class and you know what, he was right. To put it mildly, the last couple of years were not great for race relations in America. The cases of Michael Brown in Ferguson, Tamir Rice in Cleveland, Eric Garner in New York, Trayvon Martin in Florida, as well as many other stories continue to highlight that the conversation about race in the U.S. still has a long way to go. Nicholas Kristof of *The New York Times* recently wrote about the major problems facing the black community. In his article entitled, “When Whites Just Don’t Get It,” he states, “All these constitute not a black problem or a white problem, but an American problem. When so much talent is underemployed and over incarcerated, the entire country suffers.”

I want to be careful here because the issue of race, especially in our context, is not only a black and white issue. There is a long history of antagonism between African American and Asian communities and between white and Asian communities that has gone generally unnoticed in the United States, largely because the discussion on race is often framed between blacks and whites. In 2013, an open letter to the Christian evangelical church, signed by a wide array of Asian American scholars and prominent Asian Christian voices, complained of numerous racially offensive incidents in evangelical circles. They write, “We have imagined and hoped for such a different future for the church, one in which racial harmony would not be an illusion, but a tangible reality. However, as a number of incidents in recent years demonstrate, the evangelical church is still far from understanding what it truly means to be an agent of racial reconciliation. In particular, the Asian American segment of the church continues to be misunderstood, misrepresented, and misjudged. We write this letter to collectively assert that which continues to trouble us about the church’s treatment of Asian Americans and Asian culture, and to ask the church to make a more concerted effort to both understand and address the concerns of its Asian American brothers and sisters.”

Racism is not only an American problem, it’s a Christian problem as well. American churches remain largely segregated, and race issues are a tricky topic to engage. There are certainly a few things all Christians can agree on when it comes to race. We can all agree that all people are created in the image of God. This is what gives all humans dignity and value. God’s creation

of humanity in his image means that there is one and only one human race, and that all people of all ethnicities have the same inherent dignity as God’s image-bearers. Hopefully, we can all agree that racism is sin. Racism is about making quick judgments on the characteristics of a race to rate a group as inferior or superior, demonstrating partiality or bias. We can agree that God cares deeply about how we treat each other and has in fact commanded us to love our neighbor as we love ourselves. And we can all agree that God’s design is for a multi-ethnic church because he’s preparing a multi-ethnic heaven. The Apostle John gives us a beautiful picture of what’s to come, ***“After this I looked, and there before me was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, tribe, people and language, standing before the throne and before the Lamb”*** (Rev. 7:9).

However, there’s lots we can disagree about. How does one define race? Are racial distinctions and categories irrelevant or relevant? Is racism a thing of the past and how pervasive is it today? How should a Christian respond to social movements like #blacklivesmatter? How should Christians respond to the cases of Michael Brown, Tamir Rice, Eric Garner, Trayvon Martin and others? Please hear me, I’m not a sociologist or an anthropologist, I’m a pastor. In no way do I claim to be an expert on the issue of race. As a pastor, my thinking and worldview is formed by the Bible and thankfully, the Bible does speak to this issue. The early church had a major racial issue that was threatening to destroy the movement of Jesus Christ. In Ephesians 2, Apostle Paul describes how Christ breaks down walls. In verses 1–10 Paul described how the wall between us and God was torn down. We were spiritually dead, enslaved and condemned. We were separated, walled off from God. But God saved us. He made us alive together with Christ and he did this not because of anything we did to earn it but out of his love, mercy and grace.

But there’s still a problem: not only were we separated from God, but we were alienated from one another. And in the 1st century, when Paul wrote this letter, the most significant wall was the one that separated Jews from Gentiles. This was an invisible wall that separated them socially to the point they wouldn’t even eat with one another. And there was also a real wall surrounding the Jewish Temple. It wasn’t lined with soldiers or machine-guns or barbed wire, but it was no less divisive. It was only about 3 or 4 feet high and made of stone. It divided the outer court of the Temple, known as the Court of the Gentiles, from the inner court. A number of gates were placed into this wall at strategic

locations. By each gate, there was posted a sign with a warning in Hebrew, Greek and Latin. It read, "No foreigner may enter... Anyone who is caught doing so will have himself to blame for his ensuing death." What a great way to welcome visitors! Let's begin reading Ephesians 2:11-12 and here we are going to see how we were all in the same boat, regardless of our race.

What We Once Were: Alienated from God

Therefore, remember that formerly you who are Gentiles by birth and called "uncircumcised" by those who call themselves "the circumcision" (which is done in the body by human hands)—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.

Whether we believe it or not, this was all of our condition: separated instead of integrated, excluded instead of included, and foreigners instead of friends. No matter what the color of your skin is, we've all experienced this feeling at some level. We all want to be a part of the group. Every society has people who feel left out, who don't get picked for the team or invited to the party. We exclude because of pride, fear, ignorance or the desire to feel superior. Growing up in Hayward, I felt this almost every day. As a white boy I grew up in a predominantly Hispanic and African American neighborhood. At school, I always stuck out as the tall lanky white kid and because of that I got picked on and had to defend myself all the time. The main thing all us kids had in common was poverty.

Deep inside the fallen human spirit is a "curtain" that wants to exclude. In the act of exclusion, we divide the world up into "us" and "them." Paul wants us to remember we were at one time walled off from God's people. He says, remember what you once were and the condition you were all in. There are some things the Bible tells us to forget, like the wrongs others do to us, but not this. Remember you were Christ-less, homeless, friendless, hopeless, Godless and racists. Why is it so important to remember? Because it's only if we remember the pain of exclusion we'll be able to appreciate the grace of God that's included us. And that's what Paul says next in verses 13-18.

What He's Done: Breaking Down the Wall

But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far away have been brought near by the blood of Christ.

For he himself is our peace, who has made the two groups one and has destroyed the barrier, the dividing wall of hostility, 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, and in one body to reconcile both of them to God through the cross, by which he put to death their hostility.

He came and preached peace to you who were far away and peace to those who were near. For through him we both have access to the Father by one Spirit.

After we remember what we once were—alienated from God—Paul tells us what Christ has done to fix that problem. He says three things have happened. First, you who were far off have been brought near to God. Notice how this happened. It happened "in Christ Jesus" and "by the blood of Christ." For us to be brought near we need to be "in Christ Jesus," which means we need to belong to him; put our faith in him. But this is only possible "by the blood of Christ."

Second, he established peace by setting aside the law. Not only did he bring us near to God, he also brought us near to one another. He says "For he himself is our peace, who has made the two groups one..." Jesus is the peacemaker. He not only made peace between us and God but between Jew and Gentile. "He came and preached peace..." not only to those who were near but also to those who were far away. He did this by destroying the wall of hostility that separated us all. Paul is talking here about the ceremonial law. This included all the animal sacrifices, dietary regulations, festivals and all the rules about "clean" and "unclean." Those things erected a serious barrier between Jew and Gentile. But those things were always designed as a shadow of the reality which is Christ. Jesus fulfilled all those things and they're no longer relevant. And he did it not just for Jews but for Gentiles, for all people. So the wall of the ceremonial law has fallen.

Third, he created a new humanity with access to God. The result is, he created "one new humanity out of the two." The human race is no longer divided between Jew and Gentile, between the spiritual "haves and have nots." And this unity spans more than just the Jew-Gentile divide. It includes gender divisions, social divisions, racial divisions, tribal divisions. In Col. 3:11 Paul says, "**Here there is no Gentile or Jew, circumcised or uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave or free, but Christ is all, and is in all.**" This doesn't mean we don't retain our differences, but rather that our inequality before God is abolished and our differences no longer need divide us. Verse 18 goes on to tell us in Christ we all enjoy the most amazing privilege: "**For through him we both have access to the Father by one Spirit.**" There's the equal access to God. The curtain walling off the Holy of Holies has been torn in two. Through Jesus we can all barge right in with full access to the Father.

Allow me to get technical for one minute. In the original language there are two predominant words for "new"—*neos* and *kinos*. *Neos* speaks of something that is new as it relates to time. It's the new Ford Explorer Accord or it's the latest 747 airplane. But in verse 15, Paul does not use the word *neos*. Instead, he uses the word *kinos*, which speaks of something new as it relates to kind, like a new invention. So while *neos* may be the latest Ford

Explorer, *kinos* is the Model-T, the first car ever invented. While *neos* may be the latest 747 airplane to come off the assembly line, *kinos* is the Wright Brothers' plane, the first plane ever invented. When Paul says Christ died to create one new man, this coming together of both Jew and Gentile, it's the idea of *kinos*, the idea of invention. In other words, Christ died to create something the world had never seen—Jews and Gentiles, people who hate each other, coming together, doing life with one another, sharing meals together, and worshipping together. There was no paradigm in Jesus' day for that. In fact, what Paul said here was revolutionary for a first-century Jew.

God not only reconciled us to him, but also to one another. This means that salvation is more than just believing in Jesus for the forgiveness of our sins. Salvation also means union and reconciliation with one another, especially those of different races. Christians are now seen as part of the Body of Christ and part of a new society, a new race of men and women. And that's what Paul describes next. We've not only become a new humanity, but a new society.

What We've Become: A New Society

Consequently, you are no longer foreigners and strangers, but fellow citizens with God's people and also members of his household, built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the chief cornerstone. In him the whole building is joined together and rises to become a holy temple in the Lord. And in him you too are being built together to become a dwelling in which God lives by his Spirit (verses 19-22).

We've seen what we were and what he's done. In the last few verses we see more of what we've become. The result of the tearing down of this wall of hostility is to create one new humanity out of the two, but now he describes what we've become collectively in greater detail. Paul uses three images to describe this new society: God's kingdom, God's family, and God's temple.

First, we're fellow citizens of God's kingdom. We were "excluded from citizenship in Israel" but now we're "fellow citizens with God's people." Our citizenship isn't on earth but in God's kingdom. God's kingdom isn't a place but rather a realm; it's God himself ruling his people and bestowing on us all the rights and privileges his rule implies.

Second, we're "members of his household," God's family. So we move from a kingdom to a family, a household. Since we have a common Father, we're brothers and sisters in Christ. There's a bond between Christians that goes beyond bloodlines, race and demographics. I've traveled all over the world and whenever I meet another Christian, there is almost always an instant bond and connection we have. The point Paul is making here is not

only are all Christians equal, but we've been joined together and united in his family.

Third, we're part of a building, God's temple. We're not just part of any old building, but God's temple. We already talked about the old temple with its wall. This new temple is different. The foundation is the Apostles and Prophets. They're the ones who gave us the Scriptures. And our strong cornerstone is Jesus, the key to our unity and growth. And that's not all. Paul says that we too are the dwelling place of God. We're the manifestation of his glory, just as the temple in Jerusalem was designed to be. In other words, if people are going to come to know God they'll have to see him in our life together. This is why it's so important that when the world looks at us they see us living out the unity and racial harmony described in this passage. They need to see the walls of pride and self-righteousness come down. They need to see the walls of racism and division of rich and poor come down. They need to see walls of jealousy and resentment being smashed and unforgiving spirits being released. John Stott concluded, "I wonder if anything is more urgent today, for the honour of Christ and for the spread of the gospel, than that the church should be, and should be seen to be, what by God's purpose and Christ's achievement it already is—a single new humanity, a model of human community, a family of reconciled brothers and sisters who love their Father and love each other, the evident dwelling place of God by his Spirit. Only then will the world believe in Christ as peacemaker. Only then will God receive the glory due his name."

If the cross of Christ truly did demolish all barriers between God and people, reconciling people who believe, both to God and to each other. If, as a Christian, our identity is based on Christ and not on culturally driven differentiations such as skin color. If the church is supposed to celebrate unity in Christ through fellowship and worship. If ultimately, the ethnic races of the world will be all mixed together and brought together in the worship of God in heaven. Then, we in the church today have to ask ourselves the question, "Why are our earthly churches so different?" Right now the norm in America is to be in an all-white church or an all-black or an all-Asian church or an all-Latino church. Are we okay with that dividing wall of hostility? Are we okay with driving down the street and saying, "That's the black church and that's the white church and that's the Chinese church and that's the Mexican church?" Paul says, "Jesus Christ died to dismantle the dividing wall of hostility."

How do you put together a diverse, multi-ethnic church? It's not just by having diverse leadership or diverse music. In fact, I'm concerned that for some church leaders diversity has become a church growth technique. So how do we put together a diverse church? We must continue to preach the gospel of Jesus Christ.

How do Jew and Gentile come together? Paul told us: through the death of Jesus Christ and what he accomplished on the cross. We can't have this kind of diversity unless we first come to the foot of the cross. Preaching the gospel brings us together. His gospel reaches across ethnic lines and brings people together. When the gospel gets a hold of our hearts it creates a longing to love and embrace people who live on the other side of town or right next door. The gospel of Jesus Christ brings us together. That's why I am so thankful that we have a multi-ethnic church. We are over 50% Asian, and I thank God for that. But, ethnic diversity isn't racial reconciliation. This is where we, individually, need to do some work.

Allow me to offer three helpful ways we can work towards racial reconciliation. First, don't turn away. We need to ask the Lord to give us eyes to see and ears to hear the racism that surrounds us. Several years ago, I took my son to get a haircut at a local barbershop. The comments they were making in the shop towards Asians highly offended me. After leaving, I used it as a teaching opportunity for my son and I've never been back. We also need to be willing to listen to other's pain about this issue. Second, speak out. This is one reason why we are tackling this issue from the pulpit. But all Christians must speak out against racism and work for reconciliation. Why? Because the gospel is the only cure for racism. Racism is deeply embedded in the

heart of every person and only Christ can give people a new heart. One of the ways we speak out is by helping out. As a follower of Jesus, we should carefully engage public discussion and look for common ground. We need more intelligent Christians voicing their concern in the public square and not saying stupid things on social media. Third, we need to look inward. We need to have the courage to look inside our own hearts and repent of our tendencies toward racism and prejudice. We need to take responsibility for our own racism. And as we humble ourselves and confess our sin, God will continue his work of sanctification as we move toward holiness.

Father, thank you that you sent your son Jesus to not only reconcile us to you, but to reconcile us to each other. We believe that only Jesus Christ can destroy the racial dividing wall and create a new, unified community. So we confess our sins of racism, prejudice and indifference. We want to fully love our neighbor. Help us to do that. Help us to continue to be a church that is a picture of heaven, where all tribes, nations and tongues come together to worship you. Help us to forgive. Help us to heal. Help us to join hands with others to work for the common good of our society and nation. We cannot do any of this alone. We need your help. In Jesus name we pray, Amen.

This manuscript represents the bulk of what was preached at CPC. For further detail, please refer to the audio recording of this sermon.

© 2016 Central Peninsula Church North, San Bruno, CA
Catalog No. 1422-3N