

Last week, Pastor Andrew kicked off a new series called *Living Out Unity in Ethnic Diversity*.

The series is all about how the gospel honours and celebrates our ethnic distinctions while at the same time giving us a shared identity in Christ that is far truer and deeper than even our ethnic heritage. That's because through the cross of Jesus, God unites diverse people together—people of every nation, tribe and tongue— into a single family— God's family, the church. In Christ, God unites:

- People who would otherwise never share a table
- People who would otherwise never worship, grow, serve and do life together
- People who would otherwise never see each other as beloved sisters and brothers

In Christ, the church *by its very nature* is meant to be a community of boundary-breaking embrace. In fact, such unity-in-diversity is one of Cornerstone's core values as a church.

Last Sunday, Pastor Andrew shared some of his personal journey and how it has shaped the trajectory of Cornerstone's journey.

Today, I'd like to share a bit about how my story intersects with Pastor Andrew's story, and with Cornerstone's story.

I grew up in a very white suburb of a small American city. I was born on April 2, 1968, and two days later, on April 4th, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. was assassinated. Race riots erupted across the country.

My eldest brother Bobby, who was 16 at the time, watched the news reports of those riots on our family's little black and white TV. He was so impacted by what he saw that he composed a poem about racial reconciliation with a depth of beauty and wisdom that went well beyond his 16 years. The poem is called, "Then You'll Know Love" and it hangs, framed, on the wall of my home some 55 years after he first wrote it.

You see, that poem is one of my only connections to Bobby, because tragically, he was killed in a car accident the year after he wrote it. I was just a year old when he died, so I never really had the chance to get to know him.

And yet through that poem, I feel like I do know him. In fact, I feel like he and I are kindred spirits, because by God's grace, and against all odds given how I grew up and the kind of person I was before I met Jesus, Bobby's heart for racial and ethnic reconciliation also beats strongly within me.

And one day in 1996, I brought that heart and that history with me into a seminary classroom for a New Testament class I was registered for. The class was taught by— guess who? Dr. Andrew Lau. When Andrew shared with our class about the little upstart church that he and his team had just planted out of a Chinese church context— but with an intentionally *intercultural* vision— my heart nearly beat out of my chest. I knew I had to be a part of it.

With Andrew's advocacy, I joined that little church, became a pastor on staff, and am still here some 26 years later, looking at the large, beautiful group of diverse people gathered here today, and saying, "Look what God has done!"

And I can imagine Bobby smiling, echoing those very words as he cheers us on from heaven.

The Lord has brought us so far as a church, and yet in some ways, we're just beginning the journey of living out unity in ethnic diversity. Consider again some of the challenging questions that Andrew posed last Sunday:

- How can we be a community of peace and refuge for people who come here from war-torn countries terrorized by hatred and fear?
- How can we create harmony in our own increasingly fragmented society marked by ethnic tension, economic disparity and political division?
- As a church comprised of people from more than 40 different countries of origin, how can we relate to each other more authentically across our ethnic and cultural differences, further strengthening and deepening the loving unity we share in Christ?

One thing's for sure. God continues to call Cornerstone ever deeper into the journey of being and becoming a community of boundary-breaking embrace, right here in Markham-Stouffville, one of the most diverse areas in all of Canada.

Indeed, the church as a community of boundary-breaking embrace is a prominent and profound (albeit underappreciated) theme in scripture. Nowhere does this theme stand out more than in latter half of Ephesians chapter 2, which we're going to explore today. I invite you to turn in your Bible to Ephesians 2:11-22, and you'll get the most out of today's teaching if you keep it open throughout the message so you can easily refer back to the passage. I'll be reading the text from the NIV, the New International Version. Please follow along as I do.

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. 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.

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.

I'm going to break the remainder of the message into two sections:

First, I'll teach through the passage we just read verse-by-verse. It's densely packed, and in order to mine its incredible riches, we're going to need to learn some things about its context and structure. As we do, it's going to become clear that the church as a community of unity-in-diversity is absolutely central to God's purposes.

Second, we'll look at the quintessential biblical practice for living out unity in ethnic diversity, and consider a handful of practical takeaways.

Let's get started into the first section of the message. Can we be Bible nerds for the next 15 minutes or so? We're going to dig into our text and see how **the church as a community of unity-in-diversity is central to God's purposes.**

In the passage we just read, did you notice what group of people the apostle Paul is addressing? Verse 11 tells us that it is:

... you who are Gentiles by birth... ¹

Paul is addressing Gentiles, or non-Jews, who had become followers of Jesus.

It's important to always remember that Christianity has Jewish roots. The first Christians were Jews who embraced Jesus as their Messiah. The roots of the Christian church are found in the story of Israel that unfolds throughout the pages of the Old Testament and spills into the New, as God's promises to and through Israel find their ultimate fulfillment in Jesus as Messiah. Jesus himself was a Jew, of course.

In Genesis, we read how God, through Abraham, chose Israel to be his very own people *so that* they could be a blessing to all nations. ² Indeed, the original Greek word for Gentiles in our passage is *ethne* (which is where we get the word "ethnic" from). It is the very same word that gets translated elsewhere as "nations"—such as in Matthew 28 where Jesus commissions his followers to go make disciples of all *ethne*, all nations. ³

Sadly, instead of following their vocation to be a blessing to the nations, Israel for the most part came to look down on the nations, often despising the Gentiles. New Testament scholar F.F. Bruce writes that:

The pious Jew daily thanked God that he had not been made a Gentile. ⁴

In turn, most Gentiles looked down on and detested Jews. It's hard for us to appreciate in our day, but in Paul's day, the dividing wall of hostility between Jew and Gentile stood as tall and strong and seemed as impenetrable as any wall—figurative or literal—that has ever stood between two people groups.

¹ Ephesians 2:11a (NIV)

² See Genesis 12:1-3

³ See Matthew 28:19

⁴ F.F. Bruce, *The Epistles to Colossians, to Philemon, and to the Ephesians: New International Commentary on the New Testament*, p. 292.

We see one form of Jewish hostility toward Gentiles in verse 11 of our passage, where it refers to:

... 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)...⁵

This is name-calling. The circumcision of Jewish males was intended to be the sign of God’s special covenant relationship with Israel. And as has been said, Israel was supposed to be a blessing to all nations, a light to the Gentiles.

Instead, many Jews took religious pride in the physical sign of their covenant with God. Arrogantly calling themselves “the circumcision”, they would often demean Gentiles by referring to them as “the uncircumcision”. This was meant to be a put-down, an insult.

But in our text, Paul is saying that Jewish circumcision amounted to nothing more than that “which is done in the body by human hands.” Because although the bodies of their men carried the outward, physical sign of their covenant with God, inwardly their hearts remained uncircumcised. That is to say, their hearts were not at all in tune with God’s heart, and they were not in right relationship with God. Apart from Messiah Jesus, the Jews were lost in sin, says Paul, in spite of their rich spiritual heritage.⁶

But Paul makes it clear that before they came to know Christ, the Gentiles were every bit as lost. In verse 12, he says to Gentile followers of Jesus:

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. But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far away have been brought near by the blood of Christ.⁷

These non-Jews, or Gentiles, who had been about as far from the God of the Bible as you can get— have now been brought near to God through Jesus’ blood, which was shed for *both* Jews *and* Gentiles. Through his cross, Jesus reconciles *all* who follow him to God— whether Jew or Gentile.

And at the same time, Jesus reconciles those who follow him *to each other*.

Through his cross, Christ made even peace between these two deeply divided people groups— Jews and Gentiles— not only putting an end to their hostility, but uniting them together into one new people. Here’s how Paul puts it:

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

⁵ Ephesians 2:11 (NIV)

⁶ See Ephesians 2:1-3 (NIV)

⁷ Ephesians 2:12-13 (NIV)

who were far away and peace to those who were near. For through him we both have access to the Father by one Spirit.⁸

In other words, those who belong to Jesus the Messiah have become the new people of God— Jews and Gentiles together. In Christ, the two groups have become one new humanity, says the text.

That's because through the cross of Christ, the ceremonial requirements of the Jewish law that had divided Jews and Gentiles for centuries have now been set aside. And through the cross of Christ the condemnation of the moral law that separated both Jews and Gentiles from God has also been done away with, because Jesus has perfectly fulfilled God's law on our behalf.

Through the cross of Christ, *the dividing walls have come down*, because Jesus himself has become our peace with God, as well as our peace with one another.

Did you know that in Paul's day, there was actually a literal dividing wall in the Jerusalem temple? The temple complex had an outer court that Gentiles were allowed into, but they couldn't get any closer to the temple than that. They were cut off by this 1.5-meter stone barricade— and along that wall there were signs posted that read:

Dear Gentiles: YOU SHALL NOT PASS!!

(Um, that wasn't a precise translation. But I saw my chance to get my Gandalf on, and took it.)

Interestingly, that stone wall was still standing in the temple courts when Paul wrote Ephesians. It didn't physically come down until A.D. 70 when the Roman legions attacked Jerusalem and destroyed the temple. Nonetheless, the *spiritual* dividing wall that had separated Jews and Gentiles had *already* been demolished through the cross of Christ.

Since then, all who belong to Jesus the Messiah have become one, whether Jew or Gentile. Indeed, all who belong to Jesus the Messiah are now one, regardless of ethnicity, gender, social status, or whether they happen to be Boomers, Gen Xers, Millennials, Gen Z or Gen Alpha.

Those who belong to Jesus the Messiah are one people, one new humanity, bound together in Christ in ways far deeper and truer than any other category we might use to define ourselves.

Paul sums it all up in the following verses, which constitute the very heart of the book of Ephesians:

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.⁹

These verses are incredibly important.

⁸ Ephesians 2:14-18 (NIV)

⁹ Ephesians 2:19-22 (NIV)

They tell us that in Christ, we are “fellow citizens” of a new international community ruled by God. New Testament scholar John Stott explains that:

Paul is writing at the zenith of the Roman Empire and all its power and splendour. Yet he sees this other kingdom, neither Jewish or Roman, but international and interracial, and something more splendid and enduring than any earthly empire. And he rejoices in this infinitely more than in prized Roman citizenship.¹⁰

But Paul goes on to say that we are more than fellow citizens under God’s rule and reign. We are also “members of [God’s] household” — God’s very *family*. Together in Christ, we become the children of our heavenly Father. Whatever our racial, ethnic or other distinctions may be, we are first, foremost and forever brothers and sisters in Christ.

But Paul’s not done. Paul now declares the construction of a new temple— one not made with stones, pillars and arches, but rather with human beings— with people from many nations.

The temple in Jerusalem had been the heart of Israel’s religious and national life, because God had promised to live there. It was believed to be the place where the realms of heaven and earth came together.

But now, says Paul, there is new temple, built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets— those who originally announced the worldwide message of peace through Jesus. And Jesus himself is the very cornerstone that holds the whole thing together— this living temple composed of people from every nation, tribe and tongue.

(By the way, this passage is where we get our church name from. The cornerstone that unites this diverse congregation together is Jesus!)

And in Jesus, we become the temple of God! The people of Christ’s church both globally, as well as locally, have become God’s home on earth!

And it is this message that forms the very center of the book of Ephesians. What is Ephesians all about, anyway? Paul tells us in chapter 1 that it’s all about how:

God has now revealed to us his mysterious will regarding Christ—which is to fulfill his own good plan. And this is the plan: At the right time he will bring everything together under the authority of Christ— everything in heaven and on earth.¹¹

God’s will, his plan is to bring everything in heaven and on earth together under the authority of Christ. His ultimate purpose in Christ is the unification of all people and all things in heaven and on earth.

Here’s something I learned from Dr. Tim Mackie of the Bible Project that blew my mind. This chart shows the structure of Ephesians 1-3, which is all about God’s ultimate plan and purpose in Christ:

¹⁰ John R.W. Stott, *The Message of Ephesians: The Bible Speaks Today*, p. 105.

¹¹ Ephesians 1:9-10 (NLT)

A	1:1-14 Victory song to the Father, Son, and Spirit.
B	1:15-21 Prayer for an apocalypse of power.
C	2:1-10 Rescued from death and the ruler of the age. 2:11-18 Rescued from hostility and alienation from God's family.
D	2:19-22 The messianic victory monument: the new temple.
C'	3:1-13 The imprisoned apostle of the messianic apocalypse.
B'	3:14-19 Prayer for power to grasp the Messiah's love.
A'	3:20-21 Doxology song to the Father and to the Son.

What passage is found at the center of the structure? It's Ephesians 2:19-22—the passage we just looked at which says that the multi-ethnic church is the new temple of God.

This is Paul's way of very carefully and intentionally structuring his letter to convey that the church as a multi-ethnic community of unity-in-diversity is at the heart, the very core of God's plan of salvation. It is in no way incidental, but rather absolutely central to God's purposes.

Intercultural ministry, therefore, is not one ministry option or tactic among others. It's the very heart what it means to be the church! It's like the crown jewel of God's purposes in Christ!

In light of all this, New Testament scholar John Stott offers these powerful words for the church:

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 is already—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.¹²

The question is, how to we do it, both on a congregational level as well as a personal level? So far, we've seen how the church as a community of unity-in-diversity is central to God's purposes. Now, let's wind down the message by considering the quintessential biblical practice for living it out:

2. HOSPITALITY: The quintessential practice for living out unity in ethnic diversity.

If you've been around Cornerstone for any period of time, you know we place a very high value on biblical hospitality, and have done a lot of teaching on it over the years. Let me just recap a few salient points about the practice.

¹² Stott, 111-112

The New Testament Greek word for hospitality is *philoxenia*. It's a compound word—*philo* means love and *xenos* means stranger, so biblical hospitality is the love of the stranger, the foreigner, those who are different from you.

Hospitality welcomes others across difference. It is typically expressed through tangible acts of love, particularly the sharing of food, shelter and relationship.

Throughout his life and ministry, Jesus welcomed people across difference, and the Bible commands us, his followers, to continue what Jesus started. This is why in Romans, Paul says:

Practice hospitality.¹³

The word “practice” in the original Greek is *diakonotes*, which means to do something with an intense effort and a definite purpose or goal. That's how we are to approach hospitality as a community of unity-in-diversity, as a community of boundary-breaking embrace. Accordingly, this verse is sometimes translated, “Be eager to practice hospitality.”

And Peter writes these words:

Above all, love each other deeply, because love covers over a multitude of sins.
[Beautiful idea; how do we do that?] Offer hospitality to one another without grumbling.¹⁴

The New Testament book of Hebrews says:

Keep on loving one another as brothers and sisters. [Nice sentiment. How do we do it?]
Do not forget to show hospitality to strangers, for by so doing some people have shown hospitality to angels without knowing it.¹⁵

A few weeks ago, I preached on a passage from Acts which tells the story of how the first Gentiles were accepted into the church. How did this come about? It came about through a Holy-Spirit led hospitality exchange between Peter, who was a Jew, and Cornelius, who was a Gentile.¹⁶

Over and over, we are commanded to follow Jesus' example by practicing hospitality, by welcoming strangers— people who are not like us. So how do we do it?

I conclude with a few takeaways you can experiment with as the Lord leads.

Reach across ethnic difference during church gatherings. Make a point of meeting someone from an ethnic or cultural background that you are less familiar with, either at a worship service like this, at a serving opportunity like the Christmas Fun Fair, at our bi-weekly community dinner, Open Table Thursday, or some other church event. In your interactions, listen more than you talk, ask good questions, and share your stories and experiences with each other as the Lord leads.

¹³ Romans 12:13b (NIV)

¹⁴ 1 Peter 4:8-9 (NIV)

¹⁵ Hebrews 13:1-2 (NIV)

¹⁶ See Acts 10-11

Host someone from a different ethnic background in your home. Connecting during church gatherings is a great start, but having someone from a different ethnic background into your home takes it to the next level. It's more intimate. You're bringing them into your personal space, giving them a window into your own life. Serve a meal, or coffee and dessert. It doesn't have to be fancy, and your house doesn't have to be perfect. Have conversation. Get to know your guest, and let them get to know you. Whenever you host a BBQ or a social at your home, ask yourself, "Who am I inviting that's culturally different from me?"

Be a guest in the home of someone of a different culture. Well, you have to be invited first, of course... But hospitality is always a two-way street. Sometimes your part will be that of a welcoming host, and other times, it will be that of a gracious guest. For many of us, it's easier to give hospitality than to receive it. We like to play the host, because it allows us to have more control. It allows us to feel like we're the giver, the magnanimous one in the relationship. But sometimes we give someone else the most by being willing to humbly receive from them.

If you get invited into the home or to the party of someone from another culture, say yes. Jump at the chance. Because going into their space, and receiving their hospitality with humility and gratitude— can be a powerfully bonding thing. Gratefully and eagerly eat the food they serve, even if you're not an adventurous eater. I mean, don't eat something that will send into anaphylactic shock if you have allergies— but eating is a big deal in a hospitality exchange, because culturally, we are what we eat. When someone serves you dishes from their ethnic heritage, they are, in effect, giving you a part of who they are. So receive it with thanks, and down the hatch.

Learn all you can about other cultures. Read books and online articles. Last Sunday's handout from Pastor Andrew on *Practical Tips to Cultivate Intercultural Intelligence* includes a few good book recommendations, along with some other helpful information. You can find the handout at www.cornerstonechurch.ca/joy.

As well, you can watch documentaries, and good movies that highlight various cultures, or explore the theme of racial and ethnic reconciliation. Seek out cultural experiences, like going to ethnic restaurants and cultural festivals. Attend cultural seminars if you get the chance. And most of all, talk to people of other cultures about their culture— ideally when they're in your home or you're in theirs. This will help increase your relational intelligence from an intercultural perspective.

Hospitality has always been the quintessential biblical practice for living out our identity in Christ as a community of unity in diversity. And the shaping of such a community, as we've seen, is central to God's purposes. May God continue to shape us, both personally and as a church, as we continue to live into the oneness that is ours in Jesus, for the sake of a watching world.