Pluriform Unity in Christ: Ethnicity, Race, and Reconciliation in Ephesians 2*

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Reconciliation through Christ, "our peace" (Eph 2:14), is a prominent theme in Ephesians.[1] Ephesians 2:11–22 focuses on reconciliation between previously hostile groups of humanity: Israel and the nations. As such, its contents have generated much theological and practical reflection on ethnic and racial hostility and reconciliation.[2] In the passage, three significant metaphors are used to describe reconciliation: "one body" (v. 16; cf. 4:4), "one new human" (v. 15; cf. 4:24), and "a holy temple" (v. 21) for common worship by "one Spirit" (v. 18; cf. 4:4).

The repeated mention of the word "one" in the passage naturally leads interpreters to emphasize the notion of "unity" when discussing reconciliation in Christ.[3] However, at various times in the history of interpretation, overly vigorous emphases on unity have led to interpretative stances in which racial and ethnic differences have been minimized or even opposed as being antithetical to the letter's vision of reconciliation.[4] As a

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result, when these images of reconciliation in Ephesians are applied in concrete situations involving racial and ethnic tensions, the identities of and injustices suffered by marginalized groups can be minimized in the cause of "unity"—a unity defined in terms of the prevailing groups. James Cone, addressing issues of racial reconciliation in the US in the 1960s, summarized the issue this way:

> the biblical doctrine of reconciliation can be made a reality only when white people are prepared to address black men as *black* men and not as some grease-painted form of white humanity.… Otherwise reconciliation will mean black people living according to white rules and glorifying white values, being orderly and calm while others enact laws that will destroy them.[5]

This article aims to counteract this overly totalizing understanding of "unity" by focusing on the expressions of plurality that appear alongside unity in the three key metaphors in Eph 2:11–22. I am seeking to highlight the fact that within the vision of ethnic reconciliation and peace found in Ephesians 2, a plurality of identities and perspectives is a significant factor. This requires questioning some common interpretive assumptions about the passage and reconsidering translations of some key phrases within it.

This article is based on more detailed Greek exegetical argumentation and conclusions that I have presented elsewhere in *Biblical Research*.[6] I will not here repeat the technical exegetical details. Instead, I will summarize my findings in a way intended to be accessible to a broader range of readers who are not necessarily familiar with the Greek text.

Plurality within the "One Body"

The first key metaphor for reconciliation in Eph 2:11–22 is the "one body" (v. 16). This refers to the entity introduced previously as Christ's "body" (1:23), i.e., the "church" (1:22). To avoid anachronistically importing modern conceptions of the term "church" into the exegesis of Ephesians, in the remainder of this article I will use the Greek transliteration *ekklēsia*. While Greco-Roman and Jewish sources outside the New Testament typically used *ekklēsia* to refer to an occasional assembly, early Christ-believers began to use the term as a "permanent group identity" for their communities.[7] Hence, *ekklēsia* in the New Testament normally designates a local congregation (e.g., 1 Cor 1:2). Nevertheless, since each congregation belonged to a broader network, these local communities had a "trans-local" quality.[8] This is why New Testament authors can also occasionally refer to a wider network of plural *ekklēsiai* using the singular term *ekklēsia* (e.g., Acts 9:31).

This broader (or "universal") sense likely informs the meaning of the first reference to the singular *ekklēsia* in Ephesians as the exalted Christ's "body" (Eph 1:22–23).[9] Accordingly, when reading the following two references to "one body" in Ephesians (2:16; 4:4), interpreters routinely regard the concept of unity as applicable not only to the local congregation but also to the broader *ekklēsia* network.[10] However, this understanding does not always continue into the interpretation of Ephesians 4, when concepts of plurality and diversity in the "body" come more clearly into focus (4:12, 16; cf. v. 7). At this point, interpreters often describe diversity as manifesting primarily or exclusively within local congregations, without highlighting any meaningful plurality in the wider *ekklēsia* network described in the earlier chapters of Ephesians.[11]

There are a few notable exceptions to this tendency to ascribe diversity and plurality primarily or exclusively to the local congregation. Firstly, post-supersessionist interpreters, who have a particular concern to highlight the distinctiveness of Jewish identity, often describe the "body" as a broad entity that consists of a genuinely plural network of distinctly Jewish congregations in fellowship with distinctly gentile congregations.[12] Secondly, Catholic interpreters, who are especially concerned with the universality of the wider church, often describe the expressions of diversity in the "body" in Eph 4:11–16 in terms of the universal church, beyond the local congregation.[13] These emphases on diversity between and not only within local congregations in Ephesians 4 provide an impetus for us to consider more carefully the possibility of plurality within the earlier references to the "one body."

Returning to the first reference to Christ's "body" in Eph 1:22–23: although plurality is not explicit here, it may well be implicit. After describing the risen and exalted Christ, who is in the heavenly places (1:20–21), the passage continues:

> And [God] subjected all things under his feet and gave him, as head over all things, to the *ekklēsia*, which is his body, the fulfillment (*plērōma*) of the one who fulfills [for himself] all things in every way. (Eph 1:22–23, my translation)

The use of the "body" metaphor here may itself imply a sense of plurality. Elsewhere, Paul uses the body metaphor to illustrate unity in diversity within local congregations (Rom 12:4–5; 1 Cor 10:17; 12:12–27). Furthermore, contemporary depictions of the "body politic" also use the body metaphor to depict unity in diversity (e.g., Dionysius of Halicarnassus, Ant. rom. 6.86; Livy, Ab urbe cond. 2.32.7–12). Thus, it is at least

plausible that the body metaphor applied broadly to the *ekklēsia* network may carry an implicit sense of diversity.

One factor that might be regarded as mitigating against this possibility is that the "head" of the body (i.e., Christ) is located in the "heavenly places" (Eph 1:20), beyond earthly concerns like human diversity. However, the fact that the "head" is in the heavenly places does not necessarily mean that the "body" is also located in the heavenly places. The body is described here as the *plērōma*. Although many modern translations render this with locative sense as "fullness" (e.g., RSV), this is not necessarily an accurate rendering. In fact, given the previous reference to the same term in Eph 1:10, it is more likely to have a temporal or teleological sense, i.e., "fulfillment." In this understanding, either the *ekklēsia*-body fulfills God's purposes for Christ as head, or Christ as head fulfills God's purposes for the *ekklēsia*-body. In either case, the function of Eph 1:22–23 is not to locate the *ekklēsia* alongside Christ in the heavenly realms. Instead, it is to state that the *ekklēsia*, while consisting of an earthly network of associations (a "body"), nevertheless has a heavenly-eschatological purpose and significance (cf. 2:6). Hence, there is no reason to reject a priori that there may be a sense of plurality inherent in the first reference to the term "body" in Ephesians, especially since the metaphor itself often implies such plurality.

The second reference to the "body" occurs in Eph 2:16, where Christ's reconciliation of Israel and the nations together to God occurs "in one body." As we shall see, the issues surrounding plurality in the "one body" are almost identical to those surrounding plurality in the "one new human" (2:15). Therefore, we will defer our discussion of this reference to the following section.

In Ephesians 3, the "gentiles" or "nations" (*ethnē*) are "members of the body with" (*sussōma*) Israel (3:6; cf. 2:11–16). The use of the "with" (*sun*-) prefix elsewhere in Ephesians

implies a common share in something without necessarily canceling out the distinctive identities of those who share together (cf. believers and Christ in 2:5–6). Therefore, Eph 3:6 further implies that the unity of the body is in some measure pluriform.

In Ephesians 4, plurality in the "one body" (v. 4) comes directly into focus. The body is built through people with diverse gifts (vv. 7, 12) and contains diverse individual members working together (v. 16). These descriptions of the "body" in Eph 4:1–16 are in many respects parallel to the descriptions of the "body" of Jew and Gentile in Eph 2:11–22. In both cases, the body is "one" (2:16; 4:4). In both cases, the body is characterized by "peace" (2:14, 15, 16; 4:3). Additionally, in both cases, there is a combination of construction and organic development metaphors used to describe the growth of the body (2:20–22; 4:15–16). This implies that the diversity of the "body" described in 4:11–16 is not intended to be limited to the local *ekklēsia*; it applies equally to the trans-local *ekklēsia* network, i.e., the entity described in the prior references (1:22; 3:10, 21).

In Ephesians 5, the "body" of Christ is mentioned twice (vv. 23, 30; cf. v. 28). Although plurality is not prominent here, the *ekklēsia* is nevertheless depicted as a singular "body" (v. 23) with plural "members" (v. 30).

Plurality within the "One New Human"

The second key metaphor for reconciliation in Eph 2:11–22 is the "one new human" (v. 15). The phrase appears alongside the description of "one body" to describe Christ's reconciliation of Israel and the nations (cf. vv. 11–13):

> For he himself is our peace, who made both one and broke down the dividing wall, the hostility, in his flesh, having abolished the

> law of the commandments in decrees, so that he might create the two in himself into *one new human*, making peace, and reconcile both in *one body* to God through the cross, having killed the hostility by it. (Eph 2:14–16, my translation)

Several interpretative factors in twentieth-century scholarship have affected the discussion of this concept. One factor is a propensity to describe the meaning of "one new human" using the explicitly racial phrase "third race." Third-race terminology initially became popular through social Darwinian concepts of the progress of humanity and later became more widespread.[14] For proponents of this understanding, "Ephesians 2 depicts the church in terms of a new, third entity, a third race which transcends the old ethnic and religious identities of Jew and Gentile."[15] Christian identity is thereby seen as explicitly replacing previous ethnic and racial identities, a new reality that renders previous ethnic and racial categories entirely obsolete. A second factor affecting the discussion of the "one new human" arises from the opposite direction. Sometimes, interpreters of Eph 2:11–22 who oppose ethnic and racial segregation have pressed their claims for unity so far as to leave little room for ethnic and racial differences.[16]

Unquestionably, the term "one" in Eph 2:14, 15, 16, 18 expresses the idea of unity. However, there are many indications in Ephesians 2 that there is a plurality within this unity.

At the beginning of Ephesians 2, a distinction is made between two groups: "us" (v. 1) and "also we" (v. 3). The distinction is very strongly marked grammatically, and points to the distinction between Israel and the nations found in the prophets (cf. Ezekiel 36–37). While Israel and the nations are depicted as equal in sin and wrath (Eph 2:1–3) and salvation and life (Eph 2:4–10), the existence of the distinction itself is not thereby dissolved. The distinction reappears in vv. 11–13, with

"you" being identified explicitly as "the nations/gentiles" (v. 11), as distinct from Israel. A significant problem appears at this point. The problem is not distinctiveness per se, since the identity of the readers as "gentiles" continues (cf. 3:1, 6, 8). Instead, the problem is hostility between these two groups.

This issue of hostility is directly addressed and resolved in 2:14–18. Here, Christ brings "peace" (vv. 14, 15, 17) in the place of ethnic "hostility" (vv. 14, 16). There is no sense in the passage that plurality itself is problematic. However, this is not always clear in translations. A few modern translations, seemingly influenced by third-race ideas, have translated the expression "create the two in himself into one new human" (2:15; see my literal rendering above) by adding overt replacement terminology: "that he might create in himself one new man *in place of* the two" (Eph 2:15 RSV, emphasis added; cf. NRSV, ESV). This translation suggests that the unity of the new humanity opposes and overcomes plurality. However, there is no secure basis for this idea in the Greek text of Eph 2:15. That duality can exist alongside unity in Ephesians can be seen by observing the parallel expression found later in Ephesians, "the two shall become one flesh" (Eph 5:31). There is no suggestion that the unity of the marriage relationship opposes or overcomes the duality of the husband and wife expressed in the previous passage (cf. 5:22–30). Similarly, in Eph 2:14–18, there is no suggestion that plurality itself is a problem that must be overcome by unity in Christ. On the contrary, there is a threefold reference to the term "both" (*amphoteroi*), a term that emphasizes the existence of plurality (in this case, duality) within the one new humanity (vv. 14, 16, 18).

That this plurality is not merely a feature of the believers' former unbelieving life is seen in the final reference, which occurs in a present-tense expression describing Christ-believing worship: "through him [Christ] we both have access in one Spirit to the Father" (v. 18). Even in the present, while

believers have equality of access to God, this equality does not imply a sameness of identity.

Later in Ephesians, the same ideas are used again to promote harmonious personal relationships. The readers are urged to put on "the new human," which has been "created" according to God (4:24). This results in peace-making activities among distinct individuals (4:25–32), who are thereby "members of one another" (4:25).

In summary, in the new humanity reconciled to the Father through Christ's death, plurality within unity remains an ongoing feature.

Plurality in temple worship

The third key metaphor for reconciliation in Eph 2:11–22 is the idea of a "holy temple" (v. 21; cf. the "access" in v. 18). It is common for interpreters to assume that Eph 2:19–22 describes only one temple, i.e., a singular "structure" identical to the "one body" of v. 16. Because of this assumption, the passage is regarded as being quite different from the depiction of each local congregation as a "temple" in 1 Cor 3:16–17. The temple in Eph 2:19–22 is commonly regarded not as a local congregation but as a single worldwide or cosmic temple.[17] This idea is reinforced by modern translations, which render the underlying Greek using language that unambiguously implies that there is only one structure in view in the passage, e.g., "members of *the* household of God" (Eph 2:19 RSV, emphasis added); "*the whole* structure" (Eph 2:21 RSV, emphasis added).

However, there are significant translation questions in vv. 19–21 which need to be highlighted. This is because there are several Greek expressions that—on purely grammatical considerations—are more likely to imply that there is a plurality of temple worship in view here. Normally, because of the pervasive interpretative assumption that unity (and not plurality)

is an overriding thrust in Eph 2:11–22, translators tend to err on the side of "unity" when making translation decisions about vv. 19–21. Yet if we approach the passage without being constrained by this interpretative assumption, the grammatical arguments for translations that imply a stronger sense of plurality can be given due weight.

I will begin by presenting my translation in full, then briefly describe the key translation decisions. As noted above, the detailed exegetical argumentation for these decisions can be found in my article in *Biblical Research*.[18]

> So then, you are no longer foreigners and resident aliens, but you are fellow citizens of the holy ones and family members of God, having been built on the foundation laid by the apostles and prophets, the cornerstone being Christ Jesus himself, in whom every construction [process], being combined with [the others], effects growth [of each congregation] into a holy temple in the Lord, in whom you also are being built together with [the others] into a dwelling-place for God by the Spirit (Eph 2:19–22)

Firstly, the word *oikeioi* (v. 19), which is often translated as "members of the household" (e.g., RSV), is better rendered "family members." The phrase does not necessarily refer to dwellers in a single structure. It simply refers to people related by kinship who are not resident aliens (cf. Lev 25:47, 49 LXX). Hence, the point being made in v. 19 is not that gentile believers in Christ all worship in the same metaphorical building; the point is that they share kinship status with Israel under God.

Secondly, the phrase *pasa oikodomē* (v. 21), which is often translated as "the whole structure" (e.g., RSV), is better

rendered "every construction." Interpreters tend to agree that, under normal circumstances, the distributive rendering ("every") would be the grammatically appropriate way to render this construction.[19] Various earlier commentators, grammarians, and translators did indeed render it this way.[20] However, increasingly, this grammatically straightforward distributive sense is rejected on contextual grounds. The prevailing assumption that unity is a pervasive, overriding theme in Eph 2:11–22 tends to lead interpreters and translators to conclude that there must be a single building depicted here. Interpreters posit various grammatical precedents that, they claim, allow them to translate this phrase wholatively ("the whole"). However, when subjected to scrutiny, none of the precedents are grammatically sound. On the other hand, if we are not bound by the assumption that the unity of the body automatically rules out a plurality of temples, we are free simply to translate the phrase straightforwardly as "every construction."

Thirdly, if we are not compelled by the context to see a single temple-building in view in this passage, we are also free to translate the word *oikodomē* (v. 21) according to the same sense it has in the rest of Ephesians (cf. Eph 4:12, 16, 29), i.e., not as a "structure" (e.g., RSV) but as a process of "construction." This is the most common Pauline usage (cf. Rom 14:19; 15:2; 1 Cor 14:3, 5, 12, 26; 2 Cor 12:19; 13:10).

The phrase "every construction" in Eph 2:21 is, therefore, describing distributed edification activities in (plural) local congregations. Every edification activity, being "combined with" (*sunarmologoumenē*) others, thereby "effects growth" (*auxei*; cf. 1 Cor 3:6, 7; 2 Cor 9:10; 10:15) of the local congregation into a "holy temple in the Lord."

In other words, Eph 2:21 describes not a single temple but a plurality of temples, united in common worship through Christ by one Spirit to the Father (cf. v. 18). Not only is this understanding consistent with Paul's use of very similar

imagery to refer to a local *ekklēsia* in 1 Cor 3:9–17, it also explains the marked turn to address "you also" in the following clause. After affirming the general plurality of interconnected constructions and temples (vv. 19–21), it makes sense to return to apply this directly to "you" gentile readers (cf. v. 11): "you also" are directly involved in this plurality of worldwide worship (v. 22).

Conclusion

Ephesians' far-reaching vision of reconciliation includes, as a critical element, the prototypical reconciliation of Israel and the nations, presented most explicitly in Eph 2:11–22. This reconciliation, which is founded in Jesus Christ, has implications for all humanity. Christ's work on the cross, along with the proclamation of the gospel, brings peace rather than hostility and enables the common worship of the Father through the Son by the Spirit. Such reconciliation is described using three key metaphors: body, human, and temple.

Unity is commonly identified as a key feature of this reconciliation. However, at various times in the history of interpretation, the concept of unity has been pressed so far that ethnic or racial differences can be regarded as negative realities that are opposed or overcome by Christ. Yet this only heightens, not resolves, ethnic and racial tensions. In view of these issues, the purpose of this article has been to highlight the plurality that exists alongside unity in the metaphors of body, human, and temple in Ephesians 2. While Israel and the nations are united through Christ as "one new humanity" in "one body," they do not thereby surrender their distinct identities. Furthermore, despite prevailing interpretive assumptions and translations, the common worship of Israel and the nations is not depicted as being expressed in a single temple structure. Instead, it is

expressed in a connected network of congregations, each of which is "a dwelling-place for God by the Spirit" (v. 22).

Thus, Ephesians' vision of reconciliation and unity is not a vision of mere uniformity. Instead, it is a crucial demonstration of God's "pluriform (*polypoikilos*) wisdom" to the cosmic powers (Eph 3:10). I offer this exploration of pluriform unity in Ephesians 2 as a contribution to more pluralistic models of reconciliation in the church and the world.

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Endnotes

[1] E.g., Lynn H. Cohick, *The Letter to the Ephesians*, NICNT (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2020), 66.

[2] E.g., William H. Rader, *The Church and Racial Hostility: A History of Interpretation of Ephesians 2:11–22*, BGBE 20 (Tübingen: Mohr, 1978); Bruce W. Fong, "Addressing the Issue of Racial Reconciliation According to the Principles of Eph 2:11–22," *JETS* 38 (1995): 565–80; Tet-Lim N. Yee, *Jews, Gentiles and Ethnic Reconciliation: Paul's Jewish Identity and Ephesians*, SNTSMS 130 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004).

[3] E.g., "Ephesians is supremely concerned about the unity of the Church." Andrew T. Lincoln, *Ephesians*, WBC 42 (Dallas, TX: Word, 1990), xciv.

[4] For a history of interpretation see Rader, *Racial Hostility*.

[5] James H. Cone, *Black Theology and Black Power*, 50th Anniversary ed. (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2018), 167.

[6] Lionel J. Windsor, "Corporate Metaphors in Ephesians 2 as Models for Pluralistic Reconciliation: Body, Human, Temple," *Biblical Research* 68 (2023): 74-93.

[7] Ralph J. Korner, *The Origin and Meaning of* Ekklēsia *in the Early Jesus Movement*, Ancient Judaism

and Early Christianity 98 (Leiden: Brill, 2017), quoting 259.

[8] Korner, *Ekklēsia*, 194–201.

[9] E.g., Cohick, *Ephesians*, 68, 132–133.

[10] E.g., Cohick, *Ephesians*, 250.

[11] E.g., Cohick, *Ephesians*, 264.

[12] E.g., Mark Kinzer, *Searching Her Own Mystery:* Nostra Aetate*, the Jewish People, and the Identity of the Church* (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2015), 73–79.

[13] E.g., Christopher Tuckett, "The Church as the Body of Christ," in *Paul et L'Unité Des Chrétiens*, ed. Jacques Schlosser, Colloquium Oecumenicum Paulinum 19 (Leuven: Peeters, 2010), 188.

[14] Rader, *Racial Hostility*, 203–4.

[15] Andrew T. Lincoln, "The Church and Israel in Ephesians 2," *CBQ* 49 (1987): 616.

[16] Rader, *Racial Hostility*, 213–222, 240–243.

[17] E.g. Raymond F. Collins, "Constructing a Metaphor: 1 Corinthians 3,9b–17 and Ephesians 2,19–22," in *Paul et l'unité des chrétiens*, ed. Jacques Schlosser, Colloquium Oecumenicum Paulinum 19 (Leuven: Peeters, 2010), 216.

[18] Windsor, "Corporate Metaphors."

[19] See, e.g., Ernest Best, *Ephesians*, ICC (London: T&T Clark, 1998), 286; cf. A. T. Robertson, *A Grammar of the Greek New Testament in the Light of Historical Research*, 4th ed. (Nashville, TN: Broadman, 1934), 772.

[20] E.g., Heinrich A. W. Meyer, *Critical and Exegetical Hand-Book to the Epistle to the Ephesians*, trans. Maurice J. Evans and William P. Dickson, rev. ed. (New York: Funk & Wagnalls, 1884), 395–96. For translations see, e.g., RV, ASV, JB, NJB.