

# CHURCH OF THE REDEEMER

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Series: The Church  
Number: 15  
Text: Ephesians 2:19-22  
Date: September 11, 2011 (A.M.)

## THE BASIS OF THE CHURCH'S UNITY

**W**hat is the basis of Christian unity? We hear a great deal today about this subject. A new “ecumenical” movement within the ranks of Evangelicalism is gaining momentum. John Armstrong has become a leading advocate of *Trinitarian ecumenicalism* – all churches (Roman Catholic or Eastern Orthodox as well as Protestant) are true churches of Christ if they can affirm Trinitarian Orthodox views of God.<sup>1</sup> The Reformation’s emphasis on justification by faith alone (*sola fide*) is considered incidental and a stumbling block to true unity. This movement eschews critical doctrinal distinctives, especially the *solas* of the Reformation in order to achieve unity and prevent the occurrence of ruptures. Sometimes the plea is for the sake of evangelism, “Let’s put aside our differences and concentrate on winning souls for Christ.” You hear this a lot. “Let’s be ecumenical in evangelism at all costs!” But what is at stake? Unity is certainly to be desired, but at what cost? The question revolves around the Biblical emphasis and foundation for unity, not around our perception of unity. The word ecumenical (*OIKOUMENE*) has a long history. In classical Greek it was used primarily in a geographical sense. It is used fifteen times in the New Testament generally in a geographical sense also. The import is on the preaching of the gospel to the entire inhabited world, which will be judged by Jesus Christ (cf. Matt. 24:14; Acts 17:31). In the early Church “ecumenical” councils were called to debate doctrine. It is important to note that the early Christians understood the need for doctrinal purity first and foremost. Unity on any other basis was travesty. The Apostle’s words in our text underscore this theme and provide us with some clear guidelines for (and against) “Christian” unity.

**REVIEW:** Paul has addressed himself to the question of the Jew and Gentile within the Church. His emphasis has been on the condition of the Gentile in relation to the Jew (2:11-13) and the work and result of the Peacemaker, Jesus Christ (2:14-18). He has been dealing primarily with the believer’s identity and position in Christ. This in turn will form the foundation for living. There is first doctrine and the understanding of doctrine before unity and living. Unity is based upon union. Jew and Gentile are one in one body (v. 16). Paul now goes on to illustrate this great truth.

### I. BELIEVERS ARE FELLOW CITIZENS (v. 19a)

“Consequently” is the NIV translation, while the ESV has “so then”. The Greek *ARA OUN*. Double particles used in combination are intended to imply logical connection, the one simply reinforcing the other and both are used to sum up the argument of the whole preceding section. Paul, as often is the case, expresses his point first in the negative. **YOU ARE NO LONGER.**

- A. **FOREIGNERS (*XENOI*)**, cf. v. 12. The word refers to those outside (cf. Acts 7:6, 29; I Pet. 2:11), a sojourner, one who does not belong.
- B. **ALIENS (*PAROIKOI*)** lit. one living along side. The picture is that of Gentiles who attached themselves to the nation Israel; a resident alien who wanted to be part of the nation, but who could only be subject to part of the law, and part of the privileges. They were still viewed as “second-class” citizens by the Jews.
- C. **BUT**, Paul now directs his attention to the positive, **YOU ARE FELLOW CITIZENS**, (*SUNPOLITAI*, lit together with citizens. Used only here in the New Testament. The latter part of this word, *POLITEIA*, was used in v. 12). You were something else, but now you are

this!

## II. BELIEVERS ARE FAMILY (v. 19b)

Gentile Christians have not just been elevated to a position of acceptance with the family, they are members of the family (cf. Heb. 2:11, 3:6; Eph. 3:15). HOUSEHOLD OF GOD (*OIKEIOI TOU THEOU* – only here in New Testament. The stress is upon relationship, comp. Rom 8:29, Gal. 6:10 and I Tim. 5:8. The point Paul is making is quite simple. There are no second-class members in the family of God. All have experienced the new birth, all have their union to Jesus Christ and this the bond of unity with one another.

## III. BELIEVERS ARE A FITLY-FRAMED BUILDING (vv. 2:20-22)

Paul now enlarges upon this idea of a “building”, the root word has been used in reference to God’s household. “The new Society was more than a commonwealth; it was a fabric in which the several parts were joined together on one divine plan.”<sup>2</sup> This building is now described:

- A. ITS FOUNDATION (v. 20) BUILT UPON (Gk. *EPOIKODOMETHENTES* aorist passive participle – God builds!) ...THE APOSTLES AND PROPHETS. This refers, first of all, to two distinct groups (although apostles could be prophets). The absence of the article before prophets does not trans. “apostles who are prophets” (comp 3:5; 4:11), whereas in 4:11 “pastor and teacher” refers to one individual. The difference is that one is plural and the other singular. The order is likewise significant. Apostles are first, then prophets, who are New Testament prophets – not Old Testament. Finally, the expression *TON APOSTOLON KAI PROPHETON* is a subjective genitive. They laid the foundation. This refers specifically to Apostolic doctrine and revelation (cf. I Cor. 3:10; Rom. 15:20). This says a great deal about the purpose of revelation. The foundation is not still being laid. Those who claim “new revelation” cannot harmonize their claims with this text.
- B. THE CORNERSTONE (v. 20b) JESUS CHRIST AKROGONIAIOS in the LXX in Isa. 28:16, “See, I lay a stone in Zion, a tested stone, a precious cornerstone for a sure foundation.” (cf. also I Peter 2:6). Jesus declared Himself to be this stone (Matt. 21:42). The cornerstone was used at the angle of the structure by which the architect fixed a standard for the bearings of the walls and crosswalls. It was the keystone. It was the main support, the chief connection and building corrector. The point Paul is making is that the Person and Work of the Lord Jesus Christ forms the central focal point around which the doctrines of the Apostles and prophets have been built; this is the starting point.
- C. THE STRUCTURE (v. 21-22) The foundation is laid; the building itself rests upon the foundation which is completed.
  1. ITS NATURE – “The whole building is JOINED TOGETHER” (*SUNARMOLOGOUMEN*). This word is made up of three Greek words *SUN* with, *HARMOS*, building, LEGO. joint – lit. it means every part is tightly fit together, used here and in Eph 4:16. This word stresses the perfection of the Church (cf. I Peter 2:5).
  2. ITS GLORY – “and RISES TO BECOME A HOLY TEMPLE IN THE LORD.” The word trans. RISES is *AUXEI*, kind – in size, number, age, maturity, glory, power, cf. 4:15-16
  3. ITS GROWTH – “in him” (Christ) you too ARE BEING BUILT (*SUNOIKODOMEISTHE*, present passive, lit. to build together. The present tense stresses the ongoing process.
  4. ITS PURPOSE – “to become A DWELLING (*KATOIKETERION* – place of dwelling, habitation, a place of settling down. The preposition in compound indicates the goal or intention) IN WHICH GOD LIVES BY HIS SPIRIT. Paul declares that the individual believer is indwelt by the Holy Spirit (I Cor. 6:19) and that thought underscores the Apostle’s statement here, but the emphasis here is upon corporate dwelling.

SUMMARY: W.G. Moorehead has summarized the second chapter in the following manner:

THE CHARACTER OF MAN	THE CHARACTER OF GOD
1. Dead in sin	1. Rich in mercy
2. Dominated by the world	2. Great in love
3. Dominated by Satan	3. A Gracious quickener
4. Dominated by the flesh	4. A Glorious Exalter
5. Children of Wrath	5. A Mighty Workman
6. Alien from Israel's commonwealth	6. A Perfect Reconciler
7. Strangers to the promise	7. An Accessible Father
8. Without hope	8. A Blessed Peace-maker
9. Christless and Godless	9. A Matchless Builder <sup>3</sup>

CONCLUSION: The English reformer Hugh Latimer once remarked, "We ought never to regard unity so much that we would or should forsake God's Word for her sake." Wise words from a man who went to the stake, rather than compromise the truth of the gospel. To those whose only concern is the appearance of visible unity among all who call themselves Christians, Latimer's resolve appears most unattractive. We are repeatedly told by those of this persuasion that the church's major fault is its deplorable lack of visible unity. Appeal is constantly made to the words of Jesus in John 17, and those who do not join this effort are portrayed as being in serious disagreement with Jesus! This abominable lack of visible unity, they claim is our greatest sin. And what is chiefly to be blamed for this heinous state of affairs? Doctrine – or to be more precise – doctrinal distinctives. Nowadays we are told that things like the Reformation's understanding of *sola fide*, the doctrine of penal substitutionary atonement, and particularly, the distasteful notion of endless punishment and the exclusivity of salvation through Christ alone are an encumbrance to establishing visible Christian unity. But is this notion of visible unity what Jesus intended in His high priestly prayer in John 17? Our Lord's concern, as Robert Lewis Dabney pointed out last century, is for spiritual unity. The demand for visible unity is not only quite foreign to the text, it constitutes, in the words of Dabney, an enormous blunder. It is, in fact, an idol that is used to stifle any legitimate dissent, and, let me add, it is positively deadly to the health and welfare of the church. I am reminded of the remark of Francis Bacon, the noted English philosopher and statesman of a bygone era: "Unity that is formed on expedience is, in reality, grounded upon an implicit ignorance. As everyone knows, all colors will look the same in the dark." Times have changed and we are frequently reminded that we need to change with them. If we don't, we're going to be perceived as backward and outdated. In our postmodern times, "tolerance" is valued over truth, and truth, like beauty, is in the eyes of the beholder and as such must be extended to everyone, except those disagreeable and critical exponents of truth who hold to absolutes, or, to put it into theological language, those who seek to maintain Reformational distinctives. Any unity like the kind now being urged on us that is formed apart from our Reformed confessions and the need for them, is doomed to produce the kind of unity that is polluted by doctrinal impurity. It is the kind of impurity that in the final analysis ends up compromising the truth of the gospel. This is too steep a price to be paid for the sake of visible unity<sup>4</sup>

#### ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup> Cf. John Armstrong, *Your Church is Too Small: Why Unity in Christ's Mission is Vital to the Future of the Church* (Zondervan, 2010)

<sup>2</sup> B.F. Westcott, *Ephesians* (rpt. Eerdmans 1972) p. 129.

<sup>3</sup> W.G. Moorehead, *The Bible in Outline* (Revell, 1933) p. 87.

<sup>4</sup> I have adopted this section from my article "Deeds Over Creeds" which appeared in *Table Talk* (Sept. 2009) pp. 64-65.