

Christ, Our *Shalom*, Has Demolished the Dividing Barrier

By Sydney Witbooi, 9/10/2016

Ephesians 2:11-22

Introduction

In this 21st Century, there is a lot of talk about connectivity and networking. My children went to an International Baccalaureate school in Thailand, where one had to learn to become a global citizen. Globalization and even Glocalization are common themes.

And yet, rather than unity, we are seeing more division and divisiveness in our world than ever before. And the conflicts are no longer simple divisions of two different groups. Rather, there are complex and multiple polarities in every issue.

- Try to explain the civil war in Syria for example.
- China and the conflict around the South China Sea. China claims almost all of the South China Sea including its reefs and islands (which contain much natural resources, which are also claimed by the Philippines, Vietnam, Malaysia, Brunei, as well as Taiwan.
- The coup in Turkey and the civil situation in the country around the Kurdish people.
- Brexit and the election in the US. I have no wish to take political sides, but what is concerning is the rise of nationalism, ethnocentrism and xenophobia.
- The shootings in the US and Germany
- Then there is the multi-headed monster called IS or ISIS.
- And these are only what we read or hear of in the media. There are many other issues happening.
 - Islamization programmes in Southeast Asia.
 - Influx of Muslim teachers into schools in East Malaysia
 - Group of pastors being asked who in their families have turned to Islam
 - Increasing grip of sharia law in this region.
 - Language including certain terms retained for Islam

We cannot deny that we, as Christians, are also deeply affected. We cannot but be influenced by the terrible events in the world, as well as the response of the world to them. For we are IN the world. And yet, we are not OF the world³.

Ephesians 2:11-22 is a passage on reconciliation and can be read in conjunction with 2 Cor. 5:11-21. It is addressed to the Gentile Ephesians and it shows them how our Lord Jesus is the ONE who breaks down barriers between Gentiles and Jews, reconciles them to God through Himself, and also reconciles them to each other. In addition, all become part of God's household with Jesus himself as the chief cornerstone.

1. Our position in Christ is a gift, not something we have earned because of who or what we are (v12-13). Therefore, we come to Him with thankfulness and humility.

Our relationship with Christ is something we have received, not something we have earned. We were once part of the common lot of all humankind.

- Gentiles called 'uncircumcised' by those who were circumcised.
- Separate from Christ
- Excluded from citizenship in Israel
- Foreigners to the covenants of the promise
- Without hope
- Without God in the world

I cannot but think of my Malay friends in South Thailand. For 13 years, Andrea and I lived in South Thailand – always in the middle of a Malay village.

We were "adopted" by a Muslim family. I know that they wished that we would say the *shahada*, just as they knew we hoped that they would acknowledge Christ as Lord. But there was a strong love for each other.

One deep conversation comes to mind – Abang Dae – I am a Malay and to be a Malay is to be a Muslim. There is no other way. It causes me to ask the question: What would have happened to me if I had

been born as a Malay in South Thailand, rather than in South Africa where it was so easy to hear and respond to the Gospel?

I could have been one who is steeped in Islamic belief and ideology today, as well as being influenced by any of the contexts and the traditions (adat) in which they have been brought up.

But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far away have been brought near through the blood of Christ (2:13) If it were not for the grace of God, whereby HE came and preached peace to us who were far away (2:17), where would we have been today, and what would we have been today?

And yet, in other passages, Paul shows how the 'circumcised' can be as far from God.

We are justified by faith in Christ and not by observing the law, because by observing the law no one will be justified (Gal. 2:16).

Earlier in this passage we read that it is by grace we have been saved, through faith, not from ourselves, and certainly not by works (2:8).

Mark 7:18-23 (also Matt. 15)

18 "Are you so dull?" he asked. "Don't you see that nothing that enters a person from the outside can defile them?**19** For it doesn't go into their heart but into their stomach, and then out of the body." (In saying this, Jesus declared all foods clean.) **20** He went on: "What comes out of a person is what defiles them. **21** For it is from within, out of a person's heart, that evil thoughts come—sexual immorality, theft, murder, **22** adultery, greed, malice, deceit, lewdness, envy, slander, arrogance and folly. **23** All these evils come from inside and defile a person."

Romans 12

*Therefore, I urge you, brothers and sisters, in view of God's mercy, to offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God—this is your true and proper worship. **2** Do not conform to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is—his good, pleasing and perfect will.*

2. Christ destroyed the dividing wall of hostility. (v14-18). Therefore, we come to him in repentance.

V14. This passage starts off in a beautiful way. "For Christ himself is our *Shalom*". As we read in 2 Cor. 5:17ff, God took the initiative and he reconciled us to himself through Christ. We are new Creations in him.

But not only has he reconciled us to himself. True peace between us as human beings can be found in only one source – our Lord Jesus Christ himself. In addition, we read in 2 Cor 5 that He has also given us the ministry of reconciliation⁴. At this time of writing, the major conflict facing the early church was that between Jewish and Gentile believers. The conflicts today are different, but that there are dividing walls and hostilities is a reality.

I grew up in South Africa. I was born only 10 years after Apartheid – the government enforced segregation along the lines of race and skin colour was instituted.

⁴ Theologians have correctly pointed out that the Greek word for reconciliation here (Katallagethi) is different from the one in **Matthew 5:23-24** (*Diallagethi*):

23 "Therefore, if you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother or sister has something against you,**24** leave your gift there in front of the altar. First go and be reconciled to them; then come and offer your gift.

In Matthew 5, it speaks of mutual reconciliation, in that both parties need to ask for forgiveness and give forgiveness. There is a change for both. However, in 2 Cor. 5, it is our sin and wrong which needs to be set straight.

God has not changed. He has not broken the covenant with us. We have broken it with him.

However, in the context of this passage, and indeed of the whole of Scripture, reconciliation with God cannot exclude reconciliation with our fellow human beings.

We lived alongside, but not with each other.

We were a multi-cultural but not an intercultural society.

This was prevalent throughout the society. Many of my neighbours were Muslim. We hardly even saw the insides of each other's' homes.

The segregation and separation was successful in that it produced:

- Prejudice
- Feelings of Superiority and Inferiority
- Fear
- Anger
- Suspicion
- Hatred
- Bitterness

There was rarely any social mixing and practically no dialogue or collaboration on common issues and problems. I have also lived a significant time in two other countries and am doing so in another:

- Thailand for 22 years and China for almost 4. I perceived similar issues there.
- Thai and “Khaek”.
- Deep segregation between the Han and the minorities in China.
- A prominent theologian – “we Chinese do not love the Malay”.

As mentioned already, we live in a world in which we are experiencing increasing hostility, anger, fear, hatred and terrible violence. I have no wish to trivialize or diminish that at all. But a stark question which faces us is... what is our attitude?

A major spiritual battle that we are in, even as committed followers of Jesus, is between our fallen human nature which emphasizes hostility and the way of Christ, which is peace and reconciliation. This is why we come to God in repentance.

3. God is the one who builds His temple (v19ff). Therefore, we come to Him in faith and trust.

This is not a passive, peace. Look at what it cost.

- It meant the incarnation – God becoming man.
- It meant torture and crucifixion – Christ giving his life in order to demolish these barriers of hostility.
- It meant making the two one. “The Messiah has made things up between us so that we’re now together on this...He tore down the wall we used to keep each other at a distance” (MSG V14).

Our identity is first and foremost as fellow citizens with God’s people globally. Each follower of Jesus becomes a member of God’s household. This is to take precedence over everything else – our nationality, ethnicity, background, culture and worldview. Christ has made us ONE in Him. He is our anchor. He is Lord of all. He is the one upon whom all our eyes and minds are fixed – the author and perfecter of our Faith (Heb. 3 and 11)

When we are tempted to Fear and Anger, I would like to suggest three things for us to consider:

1. Prayerful Attitude:

Devote yourselves to prayer, being watchful and thankful. (Col. 4:2)

I know that you can do all things; no plan of yours can be thwarted. (Job 42:2)

We are aware of hostility against the church, but we have to guard against attitudes of hostility towards others

Do we use the language of hostility? Or is our language transformed and transformative?

Distinguish between:

- the power of Islam and the Muslims as people
- Government agendas and the ordinary populace.
- A young Syrian man blows himself up in Ansbach, Germany. This is horrible, and one can imagine the effect upon a country which has opened its doors to a million refugees in 2015 alone. The reaction of fear and anger is understandable. The reaction of some is – deport them all.

However, there has also been the call for people not to treat every Syrian with suspicion and fear. In a TV programme, a psychiatrist movingly told of her work amongst these refugees and the trauma they have gone through. One young man tells of witnessing his father being decapitated in front of him. He does not want to go to sleep because of the nightmares and images he has every night.

- Especially remember the Muslims who have come to faith in Christ.

1. The work of SU and YFC in South Africa in 1970s. Worshipping with believers across the religious identity lines. In Israel, Jews and Arabs are killing each other. Also Hanna Josua. Here in Stuttgart, we worship God together.

2. Pak Nus who lost 43 family members in Ambon. "I had to make a choice between revenge, fighting and killing, and love and forgiveness. I chose the latter".

A theologian once said that all theology can be put into three simple statements:

- God is sovereign
- God is good
- God loves us

2. Prayerful Awareness:

9 And this is my prayer: that your love may abound more and more in knowledge and depth of insight, 10 so that you may be able to discern what is best and may be pure and blameless for the day of Christ, 11 filled with the fruit of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ—to the glory and praise of God. (Phil. 1:9-11)

We continually ask God to fill you with the knowledge of his will through all the wisdom and understanding that the Spirit gives, 10 so that you may live a life worthy of the Lord and please him in every way: bearing fruit in every good work, growing in the knowledge of God, 11 being strengthened with all power according to his glorious might so that you may have great endurance and patience, 12 and giving joyful thanks to the Father, who has qualified you to share in the inheritance of his holy people in the kingdom of light. (Col. 1:9-12)

Try to find out all the facts as well as the different perspectives. I have no desire to make accusations, but let's not fool ourselves that the media – any media – is 100% objective and impartial. Journalists are people, and they have their biases just as we are. In addition, the media is a business and 'bad news sells'. We are increasingly aware of our health and diet and that we should be more discerning about what we eat. Well, the same applies to our mental diet. Are we only hearing things from one point of view? Do we sift what we read and hear?

We need to be aware of how fear and anxiety can be manipulated. I read a very good article on the BBC which shows how a particular Politician uses stories to feed anxiety and to win voters. He tells very specific stories which may be once off issues, but gives people the impression that this is happening all the time.

Awareness of what God is doing, and generally we won't find this in the media.

From MY context according to a very respected thinker there:

1. Future is bleak. Islam seems like a giant steamroller flattening everything. He sometimes feel depressed. But...
2. What does God sovereignty mean in this bigger picture?

3. Prayerful Activity:

- Could it be that God is doing a new thing in human history, and that in our time? **Habakkuk 1:5:** *Look at the nations and watch—and be utterly amazed. For I am going to do something in your days that you would not believe, even if you were told.*
- If God is doing a new thing, how do we position our church and our mission? With IS and recent terrorist events, will there be less workers coming from the west?
- My experience in BN with the prayer teams.
- Story of Derschen and the Syrians coming to church.

Conclusion

Pak Nus Not the way of the Crown, i.e. Power, but...

Being willing to take the way of the cross – humility, sacrifice and service

"God is sovereign over the course of history and the rise and fall of all powers. The future, then will not finally be a matter of superpower agendas, scientific discoveries, technological advances, environmental disaster, crises that are unforeseen and unforeseeable, or even the ongoing march of human folly. The final factor in the future is unknown but sure: it lies in God's good, strong hands."5 – Os Guinness.