

In Jesus' time, there were only two kinds of people: the Jews and the Gentiles. The teachings of the Pharisees, the name means separated ones, kept the two from interacting with one another, in order to maintain the ritual purity. Such a teaching had far reaching consequences: each regarded one another as beneath contempt. Any interaction between the two was a taboo.

Of course, Jesus could not have been a bigot, could he? Don't be surprised that Jesus also practiced this segregation. After all, Jesus was a product of his own culture and religion. We see this cultural and religious influence in his admonishment to his disciples, not to visit the Gentiles or Samaritans:

⁵ These twelve Jesus sent out, charging them, "Go nowhere among the Gentiles, and enter no town of the Samaritans, ⁶ but go rather to the lost sheep of the house of Israel. ⁷ And preach as you go, saying, 'The kingdom of heaven is at hand (Mt. 5).'

Fortunately for us, Jesus did not dwell there. We witness later the paradigm shift in the perspective of Jesus, however, when a Canaanite woman challenged Jesus (Mt. 15:22-28):

²² And behold, a Canaanite woman from that region came out and cried, "Have mercy on me, O Lord, Son of David; my daughter is severely possessed by a demon."

²³ But he did not answer her a word. And his disciples came and begged him, saying, "Send her away, for she is crying after us."

²⁴ He answered, "I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel." ²⁵ But she came and knelt before him, saying, "Lord, help me." ²⁶ And he answered, "It is not fair to take the children's bread and throw it to the dogs." ²⁷ She said, "Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters' table." ²⁸ Then Jesus answered her, "O woman, great is your faith! Be it done for you as you desire." And her daughter was healed instantly.

Jesus could not imagine that the Gentiles were capable of faith at all. Therefore, Jesus kept the Gentiles excluded from his mission. The Canaanite woman,

a Gentile, shattered this preconception of Jesus. Thank God for her!

The Gospel of Luke reinforces such a paradigm shift in the perspective of Jesus, in regard to the Jewish-Gentile relationship. In Luke, a Samaritan, however unlikely he might have been to the listeners of Jesus, appears as the neighbor who helps out the Jewish victim of robbery (Lk. 10:29-37), and as the only leper who returned to give thanks to Jesus (Lk. 17:11-19). According to Luke, Jesus clearly believed that the Gentiles were part of God's salvation plan.

When Paul arrived later at the scene, he declared that he was the apostle to the gentiles. He wanted the dividing wall between the Jews and the Gentile broken down:

²⁸ There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus.
²⁹ And if you are Christ's, then you are Abraham's offspring, heirs

according to promise (Gal. 3:28-29).

Paul took offense at the dogma that separated the Gentiles from God's grace. Paul rejected the dividing wall along the race line, the slavery line, and the gender line.

For the pseudonymous writer of Ephesians, not only the dividing wall had to go, but so did "the law of commandments and ordinances," which he identified as the obstacle to peace:

¹⁴ For he is our peace, who has made us both one, and has broken down the dividing wall of hostility,
¹⁵ by abolishing in his flesh the law of commandments and ordinances, that he might create in himself one new man in place of the two, so making peace,
¹⁶ and might reconcile us both to God in one body through the cross, thereby bringing the hostility to an end (Eph. 2:14-16).

Unfortunately, in their road to the unity of the humanity paved with the good intention, Christians practiced the same exclusion that the Jewish

brothers did. In I Corinthians, which is an undisputed authentic writing of Paul among the biblical scholars, we hear Paul lamenting a practice among the Christian members within the Corinthian church community:

¹ When one of you has a grievance against a brother, does he dare go to law before the unrighteous instead of the saints? ² Do you not know that the saints will judge the world? And if the world is to be judged by you, are you incompetent to try trivial cases? (I Cor. 6:1-2)

Paul rebukes the Corinthian church that they, "the saints," are bringing their fellow Christians to the civil authorities in order to solve their differences. Although Paul expounded on the theme of breaking down the dividing wall between Jew and Greek, slave and free, male and female in Galatians, he himself just erected yet another device that separated people: the division of the humanity into "the saints" and "the unrighteous." What an irony it is.

This human flaw aside, we see that there is a progression of the widening vision in the Christian communities: from that of the early Jesus, to John's, to Paul's, and to the Ephesians'. The vision of the early Jesus saw the community of the kingdom of God exclusively limited to the Jews. His vision later opened up to include the Gentiles into the kingdom of God.

This paradigm shift transformed Jesus from a tribal messiah to the universal messiah. Likewise, people's vision of God the Creator evolved from a tribal god, who is only interested in the welfare of a single people, to the universal God who loves everyone.

Although John's vision called for the unity of the Christian believers, still it was limited by the pain and suffering which persecution brought about upon the community of the believers. In John's vision, the Jews were not part of picture of this unity.

Paul strove to overcome the exclusive wall the Jews set up against the Gentiles, but he inadvertently reveals in I Cor. 6 his own version of the same exclusive wall raised against the non-Christians, only this time the language has changed from the Jews vs. the Gentiles to "saints" vs. "the unrighteous."

The vision that included all humanity is proposed by the writer of Ephesians, no doubt a disciple of Paul, who saw the emergence of the new, unified humanity through the merit of Christ. In order for this new humanity to come into being, the writer believed that Jesus abolished the law of the Old Testament.

But the community that produced the Gospel of Matthew gives the rebuttal to this abolishment idea through the mouth of Jesus:

¹⁷ "Think not that I have come to abolish the law and the prophets; I have come not to abolish them but to fulfill them. ¹⁸ For truly, I say to you, till heaven and earth pass

away, not an iota, not a dot, will pass from the law until all is accomplished (Mt. 5).

The community of Matthew was not going to take that assault on the integrity of the scriptures sitting down, and they enlisted Jesus as the defender of the Scriptures.

Every enlightened human being seeks the unity among fellow human beings. The more one is enlightened, the wider the inclusion of the gender, race, status, nationalities, and religions. But the actual practice is different. A Capulet can love one another, as long as the other does not belong to the Montague clan. The town's folk help and understand each other, as long as they belong to the same race. Great fellowship and solidarity are shared, as long as everyone belongs to the good ole' boys' club. The same rights and privileges are afforded to everyone, as long as they are not the members of another religion, political party, or class. You get the idea. The vision is still an illusive one in practice.

For Jesus, it was the vision of the kingdom of God. For John, it was Christian believers becoming one, one with Jesus, and one with God. For Paul, it was the vision of the inclusion of the Gentiles into the inheritance of eternal life which God promised to Abraham. For the writer of Ephesians, it was the vision of creation of "one new humanity" through Jesus who made peace.

As we look at our history in our own time, we still see that there is a long way before the Jews and the Palestinians can become like brothers, and enjoy the fellowship as the writer of Psalm 133 sang: "Behold, how good and pleasant it is when brothers dwell in unity!"

For the modern enlightened believers, it is no longer the viable practice to abolish "the law of commandment and ordinances" that has been cherished by another people for centuries. It may have made sense to the writer of Ephesians to think that, but such a practice

today will be the source of yet another contention and division.

The modern believers need to find a new way to fulfill the vision of the new humanity without having to reject what other people have cherished in their hearts for centuries. The modern believers will need to find a new way to share the compassion and kindness of Jesus beyond their own gender, their own sexual orientation, their own class, their own community, their own race, and their own nation. The modern believers need to fulfill this vision of creating "one new humanity," without having to destroy other cultures or religions, or exclude them from God's grace.

Otherwise, Jesus will always remain a tribal messiah, and our God will always be the god of a tribe, a god of a race, a god of one nation, and the dividing walls among the peoples will remain standing. And Jesus would have died for naught.