

## Exegetical Brief: Ephesians 2:16 – To what does “one body” refer?

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If you are following the ILCW lectionary, you will have opportunity to preach on one of the great “peace” texts of the Bible on Pentecost 9 (August 10, 2003). The second lesson for that day is Ephesians 2:13-22. While other texts feature the peace Christians have with God through Jesus’ sacrifice, or the peace Christians have with other Christians through the love of Christ, this particular text may rightly be called the *locus classicus* on the two reconciliations believers enjoy because of their Savior. On the basis of this text the preacher can lead his listeners to ponder their holy God and their diverse fellow men and realize they have peace with both by Jesus. The place in the text where both the vertical and the horizontal reconciliations come together is verse 16. There Paul speaks of Jews and Gentiles being reconciled to one another, and this one new humanity (ἓνα καινὸν ἄνθρωπον, v. 15) being reconciled to God through Christ’s cross (τῷ θεῷ διὰ τοῦ σταυροῦ, v. 16). How glorious the peace we have in Jesus! Indeed, he is our peace (v. 14).

Central to Paul’s treatment of reconciliation is verse 16. The central thought in that central verse is a little phrase that commentators have disagreed on over the years. It is ἐν ἐνὶ σῶματι. It will be the subject of this brief. Specifically, to what “one body” does Paul refer in his statement of reconciliation? Is it the one body of the church, a reality that is often called “the body of Christ” in Paul’s writings? Or is it the physical body of Jesus offered up as a sacrifice for sins? Let us agree that either thought is appropriate and fits in with Paul’s line of thought. But should we lean one way on the basis of grammar and context? And what would be the homiletical ramifications of such a leaning?

Most commentators favor understanding the phrase ἐν ἐνὶ σῶματι as the united church of all believers. They have much upon which to base this understanding. The preposition ἐν normally indicates the sphere in which something takes place. Often, however, like εἰς, it indicates motion which goes into something. Both of these senses of ἐν allow for understanding the “one body” of Ephesians 2:16 to be that of the church. The church is the place in which or into which Jesus has reconciled both Jew and Gentile. The numerical adjective ἐνὶ would then stress the unity that results from this reconciliation. There are not two Christian churches, one for Gentiles and one for Jews. There is one holy Christian church. Thus the reference to σῶμα must be a reference to the church. So say most commentators. In fact, Paul elsewhere uses the phrase “one body” to refer to the body of Christ, that is, the church (Ephesians 4:4, Romans 12:5 and 1 Corinthians 12:13). This understanding of ἐν ἐνὶ σῶματι in our verse would correspond to εἰς ἓνα καινὸν ἄνθρωπον in the previous verse, a clear reference to the church.

A less popular choice for ἐν ἐνὶ σῶματι is to understand it as “by means of one body.” With this rendering we would understand the phrase to be a reference to Christ’s physical body offered up on the cross. Some find this to be an awkward thought. Why would Paul use the word “one” to refer to Jesus’ flesh and blood body when there couldn’t possibly be more than one? Yet, there are several indicators in the grammar and context that support such an understanding. The preposition ἐν, a real work horse in the New Testament, is frequently used to imply means. Consider similar phrases in the immediate context: ἐν τῷ αἵματι τοῦ Χριστοῦ in v. 13 and ἐν τῇ σαρκὶ αὐτοῦ in v. 14. Both those phrases employ ἐν as means and emphasize the *bodily* sacrifice of Jesus as that which reconciles. Does Paul use σῶμα interchangeably with the human σὰρξ elsewhere? Yes, he does. Check 1 Corinthians 6:16; 2 Corinthians 4:10,11; and Ephesians 5:29,30. One of the commentators who understands the phrase in question to refer to Christ’s physical body is sainted Prof. Habek (cf. p. 51 of his commentary).

Colossians is a wonderful help for us when we come upon an exegetical question like this in Ephesians. A parallel verse is Colossians 1:22. There Paul also writes of reconciliation using the same unusual verb (ἀποκαταλλάσσω) he uses in our Ephesians verse. He also speaks of Christ’s σῶμα as being associated with this reconciliation. But note the qualifier he adds to Christ’s body: ἐν τῷ σῶματι τῆς σαρκὸς αὐτοῦ. This body is not

the church. This is Jesus' body of flesh offered up as substitutionary sacrifice for sins and the means (ἐν) of our reconciliation with God and with one another. This parallel passage in Colossians, along with the “flesh and blood” context of Ephesians 2, leads the undersigned to understand : ἐν τῷ σώματι in Ephesians 2:16 to be a reference to Christ’s physical body and not the church.

Why would Paul emphasize that Jesus had only one body to give on the cross? It seems an odd emphasis. But not when you consider that the early church struggled with the fallacy that Jews needed one kind of Savior and Gentiles another. Nor is it an odd emphasis today when you consider that cultural differences within the family of faith are often seen as cause for division rather than celebration. What does Paul do for us by means of this little phrase in the middle of this large text? He takes us Christians, no matter who we are, and leads us by the hand to the cross. He has us look up and he asks: “What do you see? Are there two crosses? Do you have two Saviors? Of course not. He is one. He made one sacrifice with his one body. He made you one with God. He made you one with each other.” God bless your preaching of this wonderful peace.