

# The Church as God's agent in uniting immigrants and natives: A case from Ephesians 2:11–22

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As the number of people migrating from many different countries to South Africa constantly increases, there is bound to be immense tension between the immigrants and the citizens for many and different reasons. Within this context, the South African Church is expected to play a critical role in bringing peace and unity between the immigrants and the natives. In responding to the proposed challenge, this article submits that the Church has a God-given role of uniting immigrants and native South Africans by utilising Ephesians 2:11–22. This conception arises from locating Ephesians 2:11–22 in the broader context of Scripture. In so doing, the article submits that the role of the Church entails both preaching and practising the social aspects of the vertical (God's reconciliation with humans) and the horizontal (human to human reconciliation) reconciliation that were accomplished by the redemptive work of Jesus Christ. That is to say, the Church should be perceived as the agent of God in uniting the immigrants and the native South Africans by proclaiming the doctrine of vertical and horizontal reconciliation to Christians and non-Christians in both word and deeds.

**Interdisciplinary implication:** This is an interdisciplinary article that conducts a thorough exegetical work on Ephesians 2:11–22. Thereafter, the article alludes to relevant biblical passages to draw some ensuing social implications of Ephesians 2:11–22 in easing the existing tensions between immigrants and native South Africans. In bringing the aforesaid together, the former aspect of the article falls within biblical studies, while the latter falls within practical-missional theology.

**Keywords:** Church; tensions; Ephesians 2:11–22; reconciliation; immigrants; foreign nationals; native South Africans; social implications.

## Introduction

There is a prevalent notion that the relentless increase in international migration trends creates tension between the immigrants and the citizens of host nations (cf. Kalitanyi & Visser 2010:376). This is particularly the case in South Africa, where native South Africans accuse foreign nationals of, among many other things, elbowing them out of the shrinking employment market (cf. Brunson & Magezi 2020:4).

Now, in view of the abovementioned challenge, it can be contended that the Church acts as God's earthly ambassador; therefore, it should continuously seek solutions to bring unity and peace between native South Africans and foreign nationals (cf. De Gruchy 2002:15–19; Rowan 2018:12–52). Unfortunately, the Church has been accused of being passive on social issues, which brings one to question its commitment to its God-ordained mandate of bringing peace and unity in all aspects of life (cf. Rowan 2018:12–52). Thus, in responding to the tension that exists between the immigrants and the natives, Ephesians 2:11–22 can be used as one of the fundamental Bible texts that fosters the notion that the Church is God's agent for uniting the natives and the immigrants (cf. Rowan 2018:32ff.).

Ephesians 2:11–22 is considered a significant text because, when embedded within the wider context of scripture, it assigns the Church the roles of preaching and living out the vertical (God's reconciliation with humans) and horizontal (human to human reconciliation) reconciliation in the world, as accomplished by the redemptive work of Jesus Christ. Nonetheless, as Rowan (2018:15) notes, the challenge is that one can rarely find a scholar who has successfully articulated the doctrine of reconciliation in a holistic sense, yet it is a key text with immense social implications.<sup>1</sup> In other

1. For example, Morris (1973:567–568) gives emphasis to the vertical reconciliation (God's reconciliation with humans) at the expense of horizontal reconciliation, yet the doctrine of reconciliation also has huge implications on the social roles and responsibilities of the Church.

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words, the writer agrees with Rowan's (2018:15) assertion that the Church has neither adequately interrogated nor practically applied the creed of reconciliation for the betterment of people's social lives; rather, it only focuses on spiritual aspects, that is, restoring their relationship with God.

In view of the foregoing discussion, this article posits that God ordained the Church to unite the migrants and the native South Africans. The study attempts to achieve this by utilising Ephesians 2:11–22 in view of the broader context of scripture. This means that Ephesians 2:11–22 will be embedded in the wider context of the Bible, so as to challenge the Church to take seriously its twofold mission of vertical and horizontal reconciliation to the world by proclaiming the reconciliation creed in a holistic way (cf. De Gruchy 2002:18; Rowan 2018:14). However, before delving into the exegetical consideration of Ephesians 2:11–22 and its ensuing implications in bringing peace and unity among native South Africans and foreign nationals, the ensuing section will give an overview of the existing tensions between the native people and foreign nationals in South Africa.

## Existing tensions between immigrants and native people in South Africa

It should be noted that migration has some impact on the dynamics of the host countries' population and consequently increases the national unemployment rates (Rivera-Pagán 2012:575; Skeldon 2013:1). Having said that, one can argue that although some migrants provide scarce skills in the host countries, it is also apparent that others are sometimes considered burdens to the host countries, as they tend to compete with citizens for scarce jobs on the job markets, which results in high rates of unemployment in the host countries (Kerr & Kerr 2011; Srisikandarajah 2005; Todaro 1969:138–148).

It can be argued that the problem of unemployment as a result of migration is so rife in large economies such as that of the United States of America (USA)<sup>2</sup> that the country's immediate former president, Donald Trump, won the 2016 presidential race courtesy of his anti-migration manifesto (Young 2017:218). In other words, Trump promised the electorate that the Republicans would restore America's former glory by, among other measures, restricting the inflow of migrants, whom he blamed for the upsurge in crime and related social ills. Upon assuming office, Trump issued three executive orders which culminated in a clampdown on illegal immigrants and stricter controls on the number of people migrating from Islamic nations, as well as the granting of refugee statuses (Young 2017:218). Thus, even though Trump blamed the high crime rate and many other social ills on foreigners, it can be submitted that his policies were crafted to combat the high unemployment rate in the country. From this perspective, one can argue that

2. In 2015, the world had 244 million international migrants, and the largest number, 47 million, were hosted by the USA (IOM 2015). This huge figure clearly worsened the rising unemployment levels in that country (IOM 2015).

Trump's scenario reflects that rising unemployment rates in host countries are a source of tension between immigrants and the host governments, as they sometimes cite international migration as a contributory factor.

In light of the preceding submission, one can surmise that South Africa's existing unemployment challenges are exacerbated by the influx of both economic and political refugees from other countries (Brunsdon & Magezi 2020:4). Brunsdon and Magezi (2020:4) allude to this challenge and argue that, in the South African context, migrants are stereotyped and accused of stealing jobs from South African nationals, thereby contributing to the high national crime rate. It is important to note that, compared to the majority of its African counterparts, South Africa hosts fairly huge numbers of immigrants from both Africa and abroad (Fauvelle-Aymar 2015:13, 24; Statistics South Africa 2017:27). Thus, as Fauvelle-Aymar's (2015) study concluded, it is evident that immigration exerts pressure on the already shrunken South African labour market, as both foreign nationals and citizens scramble for the few available jobs. Manik and Singh (2013:1), Kalitanyi and Visser (2010:376) and many other researchers echo Fauvelle-Aymar's (2015) view in different ways. For instance, Kalitanyi and Visser (2010:376) argue that some South African citizens think that their government is unnecessarily too accommodative of immigrants, particularly those from neighbouring countries who, in turn, compete with deserving locals on the labour market. On the other hand, Manik and Singh (2013) contend that, notwithstanding the above argument, most incidences of xenophobia stem from stereotyping foreigners, either as people who 'steal' jobs from locals or as the criminal masterminds who deal in illicit drugs, hijack vehicles and execute armed robberies.

In Harris' (2001:n.p.), Crush and Sujata's (2014) and Brunsdon and Magezi's (2020:4) views, the allegations that migrants are stealing jobs from South African nationals and increasing the crime rate culminate in undesirable outcomes such as hatred and violence against foreign nationals. Crush and Sujata (2014:1–2) note that some foreign nationals lost their lives, while others lost their businesses and properties or became injured and displaced. For instance, in reference to the 2008 xenophobia-related violence in many parts of South Africa, whose pattern still persistently manifests in sporadic fashion, Crush and Sujata (2014:1–2) substantiate that the negative perceptions of foreigners which emanate from the abovementioned accusations are expressed in both attitude and actions. They (2014:3) observe that it has become common for some South African citizens to blame the mounting national crime and unemployment rates on illegal immigrants.

However, the writer is conscious that there are many other sources of tensions that impede peaceful co-existence between immigrants and South African citizens. For example, some natives accuse foreigners of diluting local cultures (Corhen & Sirkeci 2011:1; Tan 2012:47). Culture is defined as a

phenomenon in which a group of people share meaning, lifestyles, values and beliefs; thus, it distinguishes a particular group from others (Hall 1976; Hofstede 1980; Mulholland 1991). The aforementioned cultural traits are not static – they are passed from one generation to the other (Hall 1976; Hofstede 1980; Mulholland 1991). However, the fact that culture changes as various groups of people interact results in native people perceiving immigrants as a threat to their cultural and national identity, especially when the resultant change is negatively viewed (Hall 1976; Hofstede 1980; Mulholland 1991). In other words, host governments and communities have a tendency of perceiving the presence of foreign nationals as a serious threat to national identity and the existence of monocultural societies. A speech by the late Zulu king, Goodwill Zwelithini, is a classic example of what South Africans generally think of the influx of immigrants into their country (Department of Home Affairs 2017). The late king decried that, due to immigration, South Africa had become a multicultural society, and despite its potential benefits (such as enhancing the nation's knowledge and skills bases), it had some undesirable outcomes that needed to be mitigated (Department of Home Affairs 2017).

Brunsdon and Magezi (2020:3) indicate that Van Lennep (2019) advocates for more realistic reporting on crimes in which migrants are implicated, because the media has a tendency to cite statements without validating them with evidence. Van Lennep's (2019) study shows that, proportionally, there are fewer foreign nationals than citizens in South African prisons. This also implies that foreign nationals commit fewer crimes than the natives (Van Lennep 2019). As a result, the stereotypical picture of immigrants needs to be challenged with evidence. Brunsdon and Magezi (2020:3) indicate that in the scholarly guild, there is a call to deconstruct the prevalent negative stereotypes of migrants. Nevertheless, although the call by Brunsdon and Magezi (2020:3) deserves attention, one can argue that the Church has an enormous responsibility to address the existing tensions between the natives and the foreigners, so as to promote harmonious co-existence.

That is, the Church should play a critical role in addressing these seeming tensions, as it is the agent of God that embodies the message of unity, particularly in the context of migration, where people of different racial, ethnic, religious, linguistic and national backgrounds are expected to co-exist. Here, Ephesians 2:11–22 can be advanced as a text that establishes that, as the embodiment of God (and consequently Christ), the Church is responsible for advocating for peace between natives and immigrants from the abovementioned diverse backgrounds. The role of the church is embedded in Christ's redemptive work, which unites the Jews and the gentiles.

Stated differently, as Nel (2015:1) notes, the message embedded in Ephesians 2:11–22 is that the Church should advocate for peaceful co-existence in the context of conflicts, including migration-related tension. This avows that in the South African context, where there are ongoing tensions

between foreign nationals and natives, as discussed above, the Church should step up by utilising passages such as Ephesians 2:11–22 to seek peaceful co-existence between international migrants and the natives of host nations, particularly South Africa. It is important to note that, in challenging the Church to assume the forecasted role utilising Ephesians 2:11–22 in view of the wider context of scripture, one should note that the author is not downplaying the reality that congregants come from the very same communities that experience some of the adverse effects of migration.

The next section discusses the extent to which Ephesians 2:11–22 is a critical text in addressing the existing tensions between the immigrants and the natives in South Africa. The detailed exegetical work of Ephesians is examined through the lens of a biblical theological framework. A biblical theological framework is a way of analysing and synthesising the Bible that makes organic, salvific and historical connections with the whole canon on its own terms, with special regard to how the Old and New Testaments integrate and climax in Christ (Gaffin 2012:91–92). The writer is conscious that the proposed approach is not considered by other scholars to be the best framework for analysing scripture. For instance, Baker (2020), in his book titled *Two Testaments, One Bible*, criticised the biblical theological approach because it reduces the Old Testament to a secondary position in a manner that is not compatible with mainstream theological positions. In Baker's (2020) understanding, this is tricky because the authority of the Old Testament is not based on whether it is more or less than that of the New Testament. Instead, its authority is based on its function, which is similar to that of the New Testament, because both testaments are the fundamental documents of Christian faith, through which God reveals himself and speaks to his people (Baker 2010).

Kessler (2013), in his book titled, *Old Testament Theology: Divine Call and Human Response*, concurs with Baker (2010) and argues that the New Testament resonances of Old Testament theology are acceptable modes of dealing with the relationship between the two testaments. In view of the critique of the biblical theological lens in viewing scripture, it can be argued that the theologians who employ the proposed approach retain a fundamentalist reading of scripture (Pelikan 2003:4) or employ a pre-critical Bible usage or reading. Nonetheless, it is important to note that theologians who subscribe to the redemptive historical approach are overcritical of methodological frameworks such as the historical-critical approach that look at the development of the biblical text (Pereira 2015:2). This is because such an approach is not capable of providing relevance, and it is inadequate for the theological task (Pereira 2015:2). In concurrence with Klingbeil (2003:403), Pereira (2015:2) underscores that this critical approach lacks relevance to Christians, because it tends to imprison the text in the past, thereby failing to bridge the gap between the past and the present. This underscores the fact that all approaches have

some inherent weaknesses, as has highlighted in the critiques of the redemptive historical and historical-critical approaches.

The biblical theological lens to the scripture is helpful because it clearly brings out the central message or the so-called bigger picture and relates it to relevant biblical contexts. In other words, the redemptive historical approach helps to mainstream the biblical teachings, whereas other approaches tend to treat some scriptural aspects as peripheral to the central message of the Bible (Magezi 2019:3–5). The next section focuses on detailed exegetical work on Ephesians 2:11–22, utilising the biblical theological lens.

## A quest for the doctrine of vertical and horizontal reconciliation in Ephesians 2:11–22

### Locating Ephesians 2:11–22 within the preceding chapters and verses

The reconciliation doctrine is ubiquitous in the New Testament. For instance, apart from the scripture under scrutiny in this article, Romans 5:1–11<sup>3</sup> and 2 Corinthians 5:19 also focus on the aforesaid doctrine. In the context of this article, however, Ephesians 2:11–22 is utilised to bring the horizontal and vertical reconciliation doctrine into perspective.

In Ephesians chapters 1–3, the Apostle Paul speaks of the triumvirate interlink comprising the Church, God's plan and the person of Christ. According to Van Aarde (2015), the message in the aforementioned chapters, particularly Ephesians 1:3–14, is that the Church was formed as a result of God's redemptive work through Christ. Therefore, the Church exists to fulfil a divine purpose, as opposed to being a congregation consisting of people who came together out of their own volition.

As an extension to the afore-stated triumvirate connection, the first three chapters of Ephesians demonstrate the roles of God the Father, Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit in the Trinitarian relationship. Van Aarde (2015) submits that the singular purpose of the Trinity is to bring humans to salvation, with God being the initiator of the plan, while Christ is the implementer and the Holy Spirit is the executor. This is affirmed by Grizzle (2013), who states that the role of the Father is to select, while that of the Son is to save and that of the Holy Spirit is to seal; all for the ultimate purpose of blessing those who believe.

The abovementioned notion vividly affirms that Christ is, in essence, God incarnate. By assuming human form, God demonstrated that since the fall of Adam, or even prior to it, he was committed to reconciling humans to him through the initiative of salvation that was implemented by Christ, as shown in Ephesians 1 and 2.

3. For further reference on the reconciliation doctrine alluded to in Romans 5:1–11, read Moo (1996:312–313), Hultgren (2011:212–213), Morris (1988:225) and Kruse (2012:236).

## The notion of holistic reconciliation in Ephesians 2:11–22

Talbert (2007:78) concurs with the submissions in the foregoing section and posits that, in the context of Ephesians 2:11–22, Paul shows that humanity was estranged from God, who then graciously bridged the hiatus by sending Christ to atone for humans' transgressions, thus achieving both vertical and horizontal reconciliation. In other words, the sacrificial death of Christ on the cross ended enmity between humans and God (vertical), as well as between fellow humanity (horizontal). Thus, on the basis of Ephesians 2:11–22 and many other related scripture passages, Talbert (2007:78) is persuaded to conclude that humanity ought to practise the doctrine of horizontal reconciliation by embracing fellow humans, including immigrants.

In concurrence with Talbert (2007:88) and MacArthur (1986:70), the writer submits that Paul primarily writes Ephesians 2:11–22 to underscore the need for unity between Jewish and gentile Christians, as their relations were characterised by tensions. Paul admonishes the Christians of the early Church for perpetuating ethnic divisions, thus emphasising the fact that through the redemptive work and grace of Christ, all humanity had been brought into union with him, as well as with others (Patz 1990:187). Although Patz (1990) does not explicitly indicate that Paul's intention is to rebuke his audience for their ethnic schisms, the exhortation for unity suggests that the Jews and the gentiles in the Ephesian Church did not have cordial relations. Given this, one would concur with MacArthur's (1986:70) portrayal of what was happening in the Church at Ephesus, where both the Jewish and gentile Christians remained stuck in their former traditions and observances, thereby causing tension and fissures in the body of Christ. It is in this context that Paul urges the congregation to remember that they were formerly alienated from each other on the basis of ethnicity, but now they were spiritually united in Christ.

In light of the foregoing argument, Thielman (2010:148) contends that Ephesians 2:11–22 is an indictment of the self-righteousness that the Jews and the gentiles exhibited as they tried to show each other that their respective ethnic traditions were superior, thus trivialising the redemptive work of Christ, through which they were both saved. In essence, Ephesians 2:11–22 reminds the Jews and the gentiles that the grace and salvation that they had been favoured with in the new covenant had obliterated their former privileges and alienation, respectively, and made them equal before God (Patz 1990:187; Talbert 2007:76).

In addition, Talbert (2007:77–78) identifies five characteristics that distinguished the Jews and the gentiles prior to the new covenant. Firstly, according to Ephesians 2:12a, the Jewish law held that the gentiles had neither hope of redemption nor expectation of a Messiah, as these privileges were solely preserved for the Jews. Secondly, the citizenship of Israel, as shown in verse 12b of the scripture under scrutiny, was an exclusive privilege of the Jews, which means that, under the

old covenant, the gentiles could not be referred to as God's people. Thirdly, according to Ephesians 2:12c, the old covenant explicitly estranged the gentiles from all its promises.<sup>4</sup> Fourthly, whereas the Jews had assurance of life after death, there was no such hope for the gentiles. Finally, prior to the new covenant, people of Jewish origin had a pre-ordained relationship with God, whereas the gentiles were known as godless people. This shows that, in the new covenant, only faith in the redemptive work of Christ connects people of all ethnic origins to God, thus making them equal in the eyes of the creator (Talbert 2007:78; Rm 1:18–23; 1 Cor 8:6; 1 Th 1:9–10).

Consequent to the foregoing assertions, it can be deduced that the overarching message in the scripture passage under analysis is that, because of the redemptive work of Christ, fleshly or ethnic superiority and privileges had become obsolete and therefore needed to be discarded (Patz 1990:187; Talbert 2007:78). Paul rebukes the Jews for boasting about circumcision and old covenant promises, all of which had now been overridden by Christ's death on the cross, which drew qualified people of all races to partake of the benefits of the kingdom of God. Paul also conscientises the Church of Ephesus that the new covenant had removed all symbolic barriers that formerly disqualified the gentiles from union with God and their Jewish counterparts (Eph 11, cf. Gn 17).

As argued earlier, the essence of Ephesians 2:11 is that Jesus Christ's redemptive work removed the hostile law which manifested in some physical barriers, notably circumcision of the flesh, that formerly distinguished the Jews and the gentiles and consequently alienated them from each other. Galatians 3:26–29 presents circumcision as a typology of baptism, which in itself typifies the salvation that derives from the blood that Christ shed on the cross. It can be posited that in this instance, Paul intends to chastise some Jewish Christians for misreading the Old Testament, as they were adamant that it was lawful to segregate gentile Christians. Paul contradicts this popular view by asserting that, even under the former covenant, all the gentiles who embraced the God of Israel were to be accorded the same treatment as the people of Israel.

In reference to the completion of the redemptive mission, which God accomplished through Christ, Apostle Paul reminds the Christians in the Ephesian Church that, in spite of their ethnic differences, they had now become one in Christ, through whose grace they had all been saved. Therefore, Ephesians 2:11–22 demonstrates the concept of qualification by grace, as opposed to the law, circumcision or ethnicity, as Christ, the embodiment of God himself, had given his life on the cross to fulfil the law. Torrance (2008:48)

4. However, it should be noted that Talbert (2007:78) conceives the God's promises to the Jews and the estrangement of gentiles from God on the basis of the covenant of promises (promissory) and the Mosaic covenant (obligatory), with the former being based on what God would do and the latter focusing on Israel's fulfilment of her obligations. The former can be classified into three categories of covenants namely, Abrahamic (cf. Gn 15, 17:1–8; Rm 4, 15:8), Davidic (cf. 2 Sm 7:12–17; Ps 89:3–4, 34–36; Rm 15:12) and New (cf. Jr 31:31–34; Ezk 11:19–20, 16:60–63, 36:26–27, 37:26–28; 1 Cor 11:25; 2 Cor 3:6; Talbert 2007:78). There is also the Mosaic covenant, which Ephesians 2:15 refers to as the law of decrees. The writer dwells on these distinctions to demonstrate that Paul regards gentiles as having been exempted from the obligatory covenant (Talbert 2007:78).

affirms that, by offering himself as the ultimate sacrifice, Christ demolished the former covenants and, at the same time, reconciled humanity with both God and fellow humanity. Torrance's (2008:48) affirmation alludes to Genesis 17, where God establishes a covenant of circumcision with Abraham (by which Abraham and all his descendants had to have the symbol of their covenant with God cut into their flesh). The incision into the flesh foreshadowed redemption through incarnation, whereby the Word of God (Jesus Christ) would become flesh and live among humanity (Torrance 2008:48). Thus, the incarnation mystery fulfils the Abrahamic covenant, thereby making it redundant, as it had only been a shadow of what was to come (Torrance 2008:48). The mystery of Christ's incarnation simultaneously fulfilled the Abrahamic covenant and ushered in a new one, in which the humanity of Christ was an embodiment of vertical and horizontal reconciliation (Torrance 2008:48).

In light of the foregoing premise, Paul unequivocally tells Jewish Christians that they were walking in error by considering themselves a caste superior to the gentile Christians. Paul points out that erstwhile privileges by which the Jews were the sole covenantal people of God had been superseded by and through the incarnation and death of Jesus, which reconciled them with God, as well as their gentile counterparts (v. 13). That is, through his salvific work, Christ had brought reconciliation between the Jews and people of other nations (v. 14; Thielman 2010:148); hence, they were supposed to worship God together. As Talbert (2007:78) argues, Ephesians 2:16 shifts to vertical reconciliation, through which God, in the person of Jesus Christ, reconciled humanity (both Jews and gentiles) to himself (God).<sup>5</sup> Thus, in Ephesians 2:16b, Paul underscores the fact that vertical reconciliation would not have happened without the cross. Paul makes the same emphasis in 2 Corinthians 5:18–19.

As discussed earlier, horizontal reconciliation also stems from the same redemptive work that God performed through the death of Christ. Although some scholars may argue that vertical and horizontal reconciliation do not necessarily emanate from the cross, this article reinforces that the crux of Paul's message in Ephesians 2:17 is that Jesus Christ gave his life on the cross to reconcile humankind to God and fellow humanity. MacArthur (1986:83) sums up Ephesians 2:11–22 as a story of God's ultimate sacrifice of love, whereby he incarnated himself in the person of Jesus Christ and sacrificed that life on the cross in order to restore humans to the position they had lost through the sin of Adam. That same sacrifice also made all humanity family, wherein they were formerly strangers and enemies (MacArthur 1986:83).

It is important to note that when Paul alludes to horizontal and vertical reconciliation,<sup>6</sup> he is conscious of the concept of

5. In two other passages, namely Romans 5:1–11 and 2 Corinthians 5:19, Paul writes about God's plan for reconciliation with humans. However, these scriptures do not explicitly allude to human-to-human reconciliation through the redemptive work of Christ. For further reference, one can read Moo (1996:312–313), Hultgren (2011:212–213), Morris (1988:225) and Kruse (2012:236).

6. Hultgren (2011) argues that vertical reconciliation, as alluded to in Romans 5:1–11, was necessitated by humans' estrangement from God. It should be understood that

universal sin, as presented in Genesis 3, Romans 3:23, 5:21–21 and Ephesians 2:1ff. Thus, as he writes to his audience, Paul is fully aware that, as a result of sin, humans were estranged from God and fellow humanity, but Christ was incarnated to atone for the transgression and thus put an end to the aforesaid estrangement. In Ephesians 2:15–16, Paul persuades the Jewish and gentile congregation that in spite of their physical and cultural distinctions, the death of Jesus Christ had reconciled them all to God, as they had all been alienated from him as a result of sin.

The redemptive work of Jesus Christ, as discussed in the preceding paragraphs, was a permanent replacement of the temporary and symbolic role that the Israelites had hitherto played as God's instruments of universal salvation, as highlighted in Genesis 12:1–3, 15 and Romans 5:12–21 (Kruger 2007; Torrance 2008; cf. Wright 1991).<sup>7</sup> John 1:29–34 describes Jesus Christ as the unblemished lamb of God (which connotes obedience and being sinless) that was sacrificed to pay for the sins of all humankind, thus saving the world from the wrath of God. In addition, Christ's sacrificial death assured humans of eternal life and renewed fellowship with God. Thus, Ephesians 2:11–22 can be summed up as a portrayal of God's quest, through the mystery of incarnation, to reconcile and make fellowship with errant humanity. In Torrance's (1996) words, the incarnation mystery:

Constitutes the one actual source and the one controlling center of the Christian doctrine of God, for he who became man in Jesus Christ, in order to be our Savior, is identical in Being and Act with God the Father. (p. 18)

The corollary to the preceding conception is that the incarnation of Christ was the physical evidence of the unfathomable love of God for humanity, in that he humbled himself to take the human form so that he could restore humans to the original purpose. Thus, the incarnation and subsequently the death of Christ on the cross restored unfettered communion between God and humans (v. 16), as well as ending interhuman enmity (vv. 15–16). The notion of vertical reconciliation (v. 16) is rehashed in 2 Corinthians 5:19 and Romans 5:1–11. It can therefore be deduced that because vertical reconciliation subsumes horizontal reconciliation, once one is in Christ, he or she is obligated to love others, regardless of their ethnic or racial backgrounds, the same way God loves them – that is Paul's plea to the Ephesian Church. In light of the foregoing discussion, one would agree with Patza (1990:187) and Thielman (2010:148), who submit that Ephesians 2:11–22 emphatically demonstrates that the Church should not be merely viewed as a congregation of Jews and gentiles, as it is in fact a body of new people who

(footnote 6 continues...)

the estrangement was not mutual – humanity forsook God, but God did not reciprocate that gesture, as evidenced by the redemptive work which culminated in the crucifixion of Christ.

7. Wright's (1991) take on Romans 5:12–21 is that Israel is a covenant nation of God, whom he ordained to serve bring all humanity to salvation. According to Torrance (2009) that covenant was to be fulfilled through whole-hearted submission to the statutes of God. However, Israel fell short of Wright's (1991) conception, given that all humanity were connected to the sin of Adam and its penalty. Therefore, the redemption of humankind had to come through Jesus Christ.

are in Christ. The understanding here is that the redemptive work that God performed through the incarnation and death of Christ removed all the distinctions that formerly separated the human family.

## The implications of Ephesians 2:11–22 for Christians in uniting native people and immigrants in South Africa

### Embedding the role of the Church in uniting native people and immigrants in South Africa in light of the Old Testament

Emerging from the exegetical work above is the notion that Christ's redemptive acts destroyed the hostility that existed between God and humans, as well as the hostility between fellow humans. That is, the passage speaks of the vertical and horizontal reconciliation. The former relates to vertical reconciliation, while the latter refers to reconciliation between humans and humans. The aspect of reconciliation in Ephesians 2:11–22 is a remedy to the aspect of sin in Genesis 3 that negatively affects God's relationship with humans (vertical relationship) and humankind's relationship with one another. However, it should be underscored that Ephesians 2:11–22 addresses the division and hostility between Jewish and Gentile Christians.

To make Ephesians 2:11–22 significant to the process of reconciling and creating peace between native people and international migrants, one should bear in mind that this passage can be applied to both native and immigrant Christians, as the passage speaks directly to the tension that existed between gentile and Jewish Christians within the Church of Ephesus. The writer is also conscious that such tensions can also take place between non-Christian natives and foreign nationals. In that case, one can ask if the reconciliation doctrine that emerges in Ephesians 2:11–22 also has implications to all humankind, including non-Christians. If it does, in what ways can the Church impact both non-Christian natives and foreign nationals with Paul's conception of reconciliation emerging in the scripture passage under scrutiny? To answer these questions, one can argue that the proposed scriptural passage has direct implications for Christian natives and foreign nationals, while it has indirect implications for non-Christian natives and foreign nationals. The notion of indirect implication of the reconciliation concept can be indirectly applied to non-Christian South Africans and immigrants by applying the notion that the Church and, consequently, Christians are God's agents and ambassadors of reconciliation among humankind.

At this juncture, the Church's role in uniting native South Africans and foreigners is rooted in Israel's universal role as God's chosen people, a notion that is intrinsic in Abraham's calling (Gn 12:1–3) and covenant in Genesis 17 (Torrance 2008:51). Abraham's calling and covenant were both

particular and universal in nature (Torrance 2008:51). Their particularity refers to God's promises to Abraham and his offspring, such as land and numerous descendants (Torrance 2008:51). The universal aspect of Abraham's calling and covenant entails that all nations on earth would be blessed through him and his descendants (Torrance 2008:51). Therefore, in locating the universality of Abraham's calling and covenant within God's redemptive plan and purposes, it can be argued that God called or assigned Abraham and his descendants to be his agents and representatives in the world.

God renewed Abraham and his descendants' role as his agents and representatives of change in the world by reintroducing the particularity and universality of Abraham's calling and covenant to his descendants, notably Isaac and Jacob, as narrated in Genesis 26:3–5 and Genesis 32:9–12, as well as Genesis 35:12, respectively. Exodus 2:24 and 6:4–5 cite the Abrahamic covenant as the reason why God freed the Israelites from slavery in Egypt. In addition, the covenant was renewed because God had ordained Israel, albeit unmeritoriously, as his chosen nation (Ex 19:1 ff. – the Sinai covenant, cf. Is 9:1–7; 49:6) (Kruger 2007:2; Torrance 2008:45, 58). Nonetheless, because the entire humanity was tainted by original sin, even Israel herself could not fulfil her God-ordained role and responsibility. In other words, Israel could not stand as God's perfect ambassador to the world (Is 42:6). For example, in Leviticus 19:33–37, Exodus 22:21–27, 23:9, Deuteronomy 24:14–22 and many other passages, the nation of Israel is obliged to be hospitable, even to the strangers among them. This was also intended to teach pagan nations to practise hospitality to the needy (Magezi 2018:39–52).

Thus, God sanctioned Israel to extend charity to the needy in accordance with the given stipulations so that pagan nations would emulate them (Magezi 2018:39–52). That is, in view of the universality of Abraham's calling and covenant, the Israelites had the role and responsibility of showing gentile nations how to treat all who were in need, regardless of ethnicity, religion, tribe and nationality (Magezi 2018:39–52). Israel is considered to be a priestly nation that God specially assigned to transform the world by mediating God's desired way of living (Kaiser 2012; Martin-Achard & Smith 2011). In concurrence, Grisanti (1998:40) cites Exodus 19:4–6 and submits that, by conforming to the law of Moses and other divine injunctions that predate it, Israel qualified to act as God's proxy to all the other nations. However, putting the doctrine of universal sin into perspective, Kruger (2007:2) notes that Israel could not perpetually fulfil her God-ordained responsibility as the agent and ambassador of God's positive change in the world, because Israel herself carried the guilt of Adam and was also fallible, like all humanity.

Given this, the New Testament presents the actuality that Jesus Christ was the perfect and permanent replacement of fallible Israel (Magezi & Magezi 2017:5ff.). That is, Israel's role and responsibility as God's ambassador to the nations was fulfilled by Jesus Christ, who lived a perfect life and

demonstrated how vulnerable people should be treated in both words (Mt 25:31–46)<sup>8</sup> and deeds (Lk 8:47).<sup>9</sup> In preaching, teaching and doing the aforementioned and many other related scriptures, it can be argued that Jesus lived a perfect life, which Israel could not, and offered his perfect life at the cross as a ransom for many. In doing this, Jesus inaugurated a new covenant community of God's people (Lk 22:20), namely the Church, which is constituted of both Jewish and gentile Christians (Eph 2:11–22), who should operate as a light to the world, as Israel was (Mt 5:14).

In agreement with Senn (1986:134–138), the writer is conscious that some scholars argue that the use of the phrase 'people of God' in reference to the Israelites and Christians in the Old and New Testament contexts, presents a *self-centred* idea, as well as projects a dominant idea that, indeed, there are people who are alienated from God's family. However, in this article, the writer clarifies that referring to Christians as the people of God does not essentially denote that other people are not, as all human beings are God's and were created by him. Instead, by making reference to the Israelites and Christians as God's people, the writer subscribes to Minear's (1956, cf. Megesa 1984) and Osei-Bonsu's (2011) understanding that God called some people and distinguished them from others. In the Old Testament, Israel is ethnically defined, while in the New Testament context, people of all nations and tribes qualify to be God's people (Osei-Bonsu 2011:70). Consequently, by believing in Christ, who fulfils Israel's role in the New Testament, Christians (and consequently the Church) are called to be holy people and the royal priesthood of God (Pt 1 2:9). This article concurs with Osei-Bonsu (2011:70, cf. Savage 2011:6ff.) that the modern Church is a body of 'God's people' from all races, who elected to serve God by believing in Christ and adhering to biblical teachings.

### **The Church should proclaim vertical and horizontal reconciliation to the world**

Having embedded the role of the Church in uniting the natives and the immigrants in South Africa in the context of the Old Testament, it can be argued that Ephesians 2:11–22 has direct implications for Christians, as they can advance the direct implications of the passage by taking the responsibility to preach the good news of reconciliation, peace and unity among humankind more seriously (De Villiers 1990:1, cf. Nel 2015:3). As De Villiers (1990:1) and Nel (2015:3) note, preaching about peace and (consequently) reconciliation is a key biblical theme, contrary to the misconception that it is a 'theological concept belonging to the field of systematic theology and the pious, mystical and spiritual experience of Christians' (Vorster 2018:1). Instead, one should understand that reconciliation theology essentially pertains to unique relations which have tangible social-ethical relevance, and in the context of South Africa, where there are serious tensions, enmity and discrimination of foreigners by the citizens.

8. Jesus equated serving or neglecting the poor with serving or neglecting God in his parable about the eschatological judgment.

9. Jesus healed the bleeding woman.

It is important to note that when preaching the gospel of reconciliation to Christians and non-Christians, the Church should initially focus on the doctrine of sin that emerges in the early pages of scripture, in Genesis 3 (cf. De Villiers 1990:1). According to the narrative of Genesis 3, after creating the first humans, Adam and Eve, and placing them in Eden, God prohibited them from eating from the tree of knowledge of good and evil (De Villiers 1990:1). However, they violated God's command; therefore, the relationship between God and humans (vertical relationship) was distorted. The horizontal relationship between fellow humans was also distorted, as evidenced by Cain's hatred for Abel, as recounted in Genesis 4:1–18 (De Villiers 1990:1).

Thus, through Adam's sin in Genesis 3, both the vertical and horizontal relationships were jeopardised (De Villiers 1990:1). In this way, one can argue that the enmity between the natives and foreign nationals in South Africa is a result of sin, as all humankind are sinful and have to believe in the saving work of Jesus Christ, as indicated in Ephesians 2:11–22, so their relationships with God and one another can be restored. Some passages in the New Testament, notably Romans 5:12–21 and 1 Corinthians 15:21–22, draw parallels between Adam and Christ – that is, Adam subjected all humankind to sin and death, while Christ cancelled the sin of Adam and brought life to all people who would believe in him and his work of salvation. Jewett (2007) contrasts Adam to Christ, in the context of Romans 5:12–21, and argues that Paul rightly presents the latter as greater than the former in many ways.

With regard to expanding the Church's responsibility of preaching the gospel of reconciliation to all people (Christians and non-Christians), one can bring Jesus' teaching in the Sermon on the Mount to bear in this conversation (Mt 5:14). Jesus tells his followers that they are supposed to bring light where there is darkness, that is, by sharing their faith in Jesus Christ with the unsaved. Jesus Christ saved humankind from sin and its consequences, as well as revealed the plans of God for humanity, one of which was accomplished through the redemptive work of Jesus Christ, which unites and reconciles people from different ethnic, linguistic, tribal and national groups in Christ (Eph 2:11–22).

Stated differently, Ephesians 2:11–22 affirms that God reconciles himself with people who believe in Christ's saving work, which is vertical reconciliation, which also results in horizontal reconciliation among people (Eph 2:11–22, cf. Thielman 2010:148). This explicitly shows that the Church should preach Christ's death and resurrection, through which the hostility and enmity which characterised the God–humanity and interhuman relationship were destroyed (Thielman 2010:148). This point is validated by 2 Corinthians 5:19, which indicates that through Christ's substitutionary death, God reconciled the world to himself (Vorster 2018:2). Now, God has bequeathed Christians (and consequently the church) the mission of restoring humanity to himself (cf. 2 Cor 5:19). That is to say, Christians are the ambassadors of Christ, as God makes his appeal for humankind to be

reconciled to himself through Christ's followers (2 Cor 5:20). Thus, as Nel (2015:3) notes, the reconciliation creed in the proposed scripture passage gives birth to the Church, which is the new inclusive community of God's people. In this case, the reconciliation dogma has a cosmic implication, as Christians are expected to practise the notion comprehensively, as indicated in Ephesians 2:11–22 (Nel 2015:3).

Thus, in interlinking Ephesians 2:11–22 and 2 Corinthians 5:19, one can argue that God tasked the Church to spread the message of peace and forgiveness to humankind. That is, through the redemptive work of Christ, God brought humanity into the right relationship with himself, as well as with one another, as they were all united in Christ, the head of the Church and all humanity (cf. Savage 2011:7). In other words, when humans are reconciled to God, humanity can interrelate without exclusionary practices such as discrimination, enmity and hostility. This is the message that Christians (and consequently the Church) should preach to the world in which they are God's light and are mandated to bring positive change. Savage (2011) understands the aforementioned conception well and notes that for God, the Church is the starting point for reconciliation and Christ-focused evangelism; thus, it is a true reflection of God's glory and helping hand in the world, as Paul articulates in Ephesians 1:23 and 3:19.

Stated otherwise, one can argue that for the doctrine of reconciliation to have direct impact on all people, they should believe in the redemptive work of Jesus Christ, as indicated in Ephesians 2:11–22. When people receive salvation through Christ, they now share God's vision of reconciling humankind to himself and to one another. Thus, faith enables Christians to feel obliged to perceive people beyond racial, religious, linguistic and ethnic backgrounds. Ephesians 1:10 reveals that, for Christians, Christ is the foundation of both vertical and horizontal reconciliation (Platinga 2005:82–83). That is, although reconciliation has a vertical aspect, it is important for Christians to comprehend that it also focuses on 'the renewed relationships of all people', as the Church preaches the message of reconciliation to Christians and non-Christians. While the preaching to Christians reminds them of their new relationship with Christ and its horizontal implications, it follows that it enables non-Christians to be reconciled to God and consequently to other people, and the resultant horizontal reconciliation would be free of discrimination, hostility and enmity (cf. Vorster 2018:3). This unequivocally affirms that the doctrine of reconciliation seeks to establish peace among humankind. Therefore, this doctrine can be applied in the context of South Africa and many other places where tensions between international migrants and natives take the centre stage.

That is to say, the Church in South Africa and beyond should preach the doctrine of vertical and horizontal reconciliation so that people can become converted and share God's vision of unity and peace among all humanity, a trait that God desires to see exhibited by those who are under the reign of

Christ by faith. This implies that Christians must exhibit love without limits or boundaries by loving people from all nations, ethnic, religious and national backgrounds. In this sense, Vorster (2018) argues that the ecology of reconciliation starts with vertical reconciliation, which in turn spawns horizontal reconciliation, not vice versa. The writer concurs with Platinga's (2005:82–83, cf. West 2001:170) argument that Ephesians 2:11–22 describes an ideal scenario wherein Christians live in harmony with each other, as well as with non-Christians in their respective communities and beyond. In other words, as God's earthly ambassadors, Christians should endeavour to demolish all barriers that inhibit peaceful co-existence of humanity.

### **The Church in South Africa should live the doctrine of reconciliation: Exemplary peace and unity with people from other nations**

Having established the responsibility of the Church to preach the doctrine of reconciliation to all people, it can now be affirmed that the Church should be a social ethic community that lives the implications of a relationship that is reconciled with God; thus, they are supposed to be the ambassadors of moral conduct in the world (Hauerwas 1981:42; Vorster 2018:4). That is to say, the lives of Christians should demonstrate what reconciliation means in practice (Hauerwas 1981:42; Vorster 2018:4). A considerable number of scholars (De Villiers 1990:14; Nel 2015:1; Platinga 2005:82–83; Vorster 2018:4) are of the opinion that Christians should always demonstrate reconciliation, peace and unity with fellow humanity from diverse backgrounds. That is, when the South African Church, which ought to be an ambassador of peace and unity in the world, becomes the centre of division, discrimination and hostility to Christians of foreign origin, it has failed to live by example. As Vorster (2018:4) notes, the Church can become an 'image of the broken society rather than an image of God's reconciled community'. Hence, Nel (2015:7) rightly observes that Ephesians 2:11–22 entails that Christians should not expect peace and harmony in the world if they themselves do not use their faith as a rallying point for reconciliation and nondiscriminatory co-existence of people in their immediate communities.

However, Christians in South Africa and beyond are also supposed to live a reconciled life with Christians and non-Christian foreign nationals (cf. Barth 1956:677; De Gruchy 2002:15–19). This is the life of peace and unity with Christians and non-Christian foreign nationals, which denotes the 'relational outworking of the doctrine of reconciliation' which 'presupposes communities of local Christians who together live as peacemakers in their local context' (cf. Barth 1956:677; Rowan 2018:44). They should be able to do that by living lives that are free of discrimination, hostility and alienation towards non-Christian foreign nationals. This means that wherever Christians perceive acts of discrimination of foreign nationals (whether Christian or not), they should defend them (cf. De Gruchy 2002:15–19).

Likewise, discrimination or exclusion of Christian and non-Christian natives by foreign nationals should not be condoned, because Christians should be considered peacemakers in these contexts and many others. That is, when tension arises between citizens and immigrants in South Africa, Christians have an obligation to impartially broker peace and reconciliation. Thus, it can be posited that the Church should use its various creeds, such as the doctrine of sin and reconciliation, which state that God saved the world (including humankind) in and through Christ's saving work, so that non-Christian natives and foreign nationals should experience the host country from the perspective of the Church.

In essence, the Church can defuse the tensions between natives and foreign nationals in the various communities, as the body of Christ should play the role of peacemaker and defender of vulnerable people who are usually discriminated against by society (cf. Nel 2015:1). For the Church to be able to discharge its mission of reconciliation in the aforementioned forms, the writer argues that the notion of becoming among Christians should come to bear in this conversation. For Christians, the notion of becoming entails a *kenotic* shift or movement from one's privileged position to the position of the other, as the God-man, Jesus Christ, demonstrated in the incarnational mystery (cf. Php 2:1–10). Stated otherwise, *kenotic* shift means 'being the other person', which entails an attitude shift or a practical or physical shift from one's position to that of others. This clearly challenges South African Christians to be empathetic (i.e. putting themselves in the shoes of others so as to understand their emotions and viewpoints). When the Church exercises empathy, its actions or responses to the immigration challenges will neither be xenophobic nor discriminatory.

Having said that, it can be advanced that the Church can use these opportunities to advance God's mission of reconciling humankind to himself and fellow humankind. By God's grace and the inner regeneration power of the Holy Spirit, some people can believe in Jesus Christ and be saved through their (Christians') vertical and horizontal ministry of reconciliation in the world. The people who would have been saved as a result of the vertical and horizontal ministries of reconciliation can be positively transformed and they can also start to view people from other nations as fellow brethren in Christ. In so doing, they can discard their former enmity, discrimination and hostility towards people from other nations. However, the writer is conscious that Christians may also struggle to practise the implications of their restored relationship with God, namely living in unity and peace with people from other nations. In his book titled *Reconciliation: Restoring Justice*, De Gruchy's (2002:19) understanding of the aforementioned argument is that Christians should not only proclaim reconciliation, but they must practically demonstrate it to the world.

Here, Christians should be consistently reminded to conduct themselves according to their sanctified status using

scriptural passages such as Ephesians 2:11–22 that foster unity and peace among people from different ethnic and national backgrounds. Having clarified the aforementioned, it is befitting to conclude by citing the following words by Vorster (2018) that:

[R]econciliation depicts the renewal of all other relationships. Christians live in a new relationship with the 'other' and has to realise these new relationships in their prophetic testimony and priestly deeds in society. They have to be the custodians in the formation of true humanity by promoting reconciliation between all people in society. (p. 8)

## Conclusion

This article established that the increase in the number of people who are migrating to South Africa is creating tension between South African natives and foreign nationals. In attempting to address the tensions that exist between native South Africans and foreign nationals, the article presented Ephesians 2:11–22 as one of the critical scripture passages that establish the Christian movement and the Christian Church as God's agents in uniting immigrants and natives.

That is, from a thorough exegetical work of Ephesians 2:11–22, it has been established that the passage addresses the Jewish–gentile hostility in the Church of Ephesus. Now, the same passage indicates that all Christians, regardless of ethnic origin, were reconciled to God (vertical reconciliation) and to one another (horizontal reconciliation) through Christ's redemptive work. However, it is important to note that although the passage has direct implications for Christians (i.e. Christians from different national and ethnic backgrounds should live in peace and unity with one another), one can argue that Ephesians 2:11–22 advances the notion that Christians (and consequently the Church) are agents of God in uniting native South Africans and foreign nationals. This was established by embedding the passage within the wider context of Scripture, in which the Church is viewed as the entity that fulfils the God-ordained role of the nation of Israel, which was God's sole agent of change in the world within the Old Testament context. It is from within this context that the Church can take charge and advance the vertical and horizontal reconciliation to the world. In this role, the Church conjointly works with God to reconcile all humanity to him, as well as restoring peace and unity between humankind, which had been jeopardised by sin (Gn 3; cf. 2 Cor 5:11–21).

This article established that the Church's ministry of reconciliation that can have significant implications on both Christians and non-Christians is twofold. Firstly, the Church should preach the gospel of vertical and horizontal reconciliation to both Christians and non-Christians. Here, when preaching the doctrine of reconciliation to Christians, the Church is simply reminding them to reconcile with one another, regardless of national and ethnic backgrounds. When preaching to non-Christians, the Church is seeking their conversion so that they can also be reconciled with God, and their understanding of their vertical reconciliation with

God will result in a right relationship with fellow human beings, that is, a life that is free of tensions and practices that exclude foreign nationals and vice versa. This also applies to those foreign nationals who will be converted. Secondly, the Church in South Africa and beyond should live the doctrine of vertical reconciliation that results in a right relationship with one another, that is, exemplifying peace and unity with people from different cultural, national, linguistic and ethnic backgrounds so that non-Christians can see and emulate how human beings ought to treat one another. In so doing, Christians fulfil Israel's God-ordained role (in the Old Testament) of being light to the world. In this way, the Church can play a critical role as God's agent of change in the world, that is uniting natives and foreign nationals in South Africa.

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