

In Herod's temple in Jerusalem, there was a wall about nine feet high separating the inner courts of the temple from the outer court. On that wall, there was an inscription that read: "No foreigner may enter within the barrier and enclosure round the temple. Anyone who is caught doing so will have himself to blame for his ensuing death."¹ An uncircumcised Gentile could come up to that wall and observe what was happening as the Jews gathered to worship God, but if he tried to cross the wall, he would be killed.

About thirty years after Jesus died and rose again, an infamous Pharisee was accused of defiling the holy place, and very nearly beaten to death, for the crime of bringing a Gentile into the temple. That Pharisee was the Apostle Paul, who wrote this letter to the Ephesians, and the Gentile that he supposedly brought into the temple was Trophimus the *Ephesian*. This is recorded in Acts. 21:27ff, and there is no better illustration of what Paul is describing here in Ephesians 2:11-12. "Remember the way it used to be?" Paul says. At that time, there was not only a literal wall, but also a deathly hatred between Jew and Gentile that kept the Gentiles in this terrible state of being Christless, homeless, friendless, hopeless, and godless.

Then we get to vs. 13: that was then, *but now...* "Once, you were far off; now, you have been brought near." Christ has torn down that dividing wall. Now, the two, Jew and Gentile, have been recreated as one new man. Now there is no longer enmity, but peace, because of the cross. Now, through Christ, both Jew and Gentile have access in one Spirit to God, and are together being built into a new temple. And in this temple, there is no dividing wall to be found, because all who come to God through Christ are fellow citizens with the saints and members of God's holy household.

This second half of chapter 2 cycles through the same story of reconciliation that we saw in the first ten verses, but there, the emphasis was on God's work in getting sinners into heaven; here, the emphasis is on getting enemies together into the same room in peace. Vv. 1-10 focus on the vertical dimension of salvation, and vv. 11-22 deal with the horizontal, and the connecting point is Christ.

As vs. 13 says, you've been united to Christ by faith (that's conversion), and you've been brought near to God by the blood of Christ (that's the cross). Because of the cross, and by your conversion, you've been reconciled to God.

¹ Stott, *The Message of Ephesians*, 92.

And in vv. 14-18, Paul explains just how Christ's blood accomplished this, how the cross gives us access to God and unites Jews and Gentiles into one new man. Jesus didn't just *tell* two hostile people groups to be at peace; He Himself *is* our peace. How? First, He broke down the wall, so that He could create *one new man* out of two, and reconcile that *one body* to God. Second, he came and preached peace to those both far and near. He *accomplished* peace on the cross, and *announced* that peace through the preaching of the gospel.

The law of commandments expressed in ordinances divided the world into two groups: Jews/lawkeepers/"the circumcision", and Gentiles/lawless/"the uncircumcision", and formed a wall of hostility between them. The purpose of the law was to make sure that sinners didn't get too close to God. Those who kept the law could get close for brief moments; those who didn't keep the law were far away from God.

Because Jesus bore the sins of the world on the cross, the law exhausted itself on Jesus. He absorbed in His own body the penalty for breaking God's commandments, but then God reversed the verdict of death and lifted Jesus up into His very presence. As v. 4-10 taught us, because of God's grace, when you put your faith in Jesus, you are united to Him so that His death is your death, His resurrection is your resurrection, and His access to God is your access to God. We're with Jesus, which means that we have access to God, not by lawkeeping, but by faith!

And so the world is no longer divided into lawkeepers and lawbreakers, the circumcision and the uncircumcision. Now, the divide is between those *in* Christ and those *outside* of Christ. And the big difference is that Jesus replaces a long list of commandments expressed in ordinances with *faith*; you have access to God by faith.

So Jesus *accomplished* peace by getting rid of the wall, and He *announces* peace through His messengers – peace to those who are far off, and peace to those who are near – so that *everyone* who hears can draw near to God by faith! In this way, Jesus unites Jewish man and Gentile man into one new man, *Christian* man! This one new man is reconciled to God through the cross, so that through Christ we both have access in one Spirit (notice how the whole Trinity is here) to the Father.

So in verses 19-22, Paul explains the ramifications of Jesus' work in making one new man. Since this is true, then what used to be the case for the Gentiles no longer applies. You are no

longer strangers and aliens, kept away from God by circumcision and the law of God. Now you are fellow-citizens with the saints, members of God's household.

Paul leans in on that final metaphor, using some version of the house/household word six times in these few verses as he explains how God's dwelling place is put together. You are being built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Paul says, those who have passed on God's inspired revelation to you.

The foundation of our faith is the essentially the writings of the New Testament, which are all centered on Christ as the cornerstone. Christ determines everything about God's house, the revelation we have through the apostles and prophets connects us to Christ and builds us up, and as Jews and Gentiles are joined in Jesus, we are being built together into one house by the Spirit. V. 21 tells us that this house is a new *temple*, a dwelling place for God. In this temple, because of what Christ has done, there are no walls to divide us from each other, and God Himself dwells in our midst, and there is peace between us all. Once you were far off, but now you have been brought near through Christ, and God is with you. That's good news!

And although we haven't yet gotten to Paul's application in the second half of this letter, I want to look briefly at what this means for our unity as God's people. This passage is the theological basis for the Church's unity, and if our practice doesn't match our theology, then we're in trouble.

In Ephesians, the primary focus is on how Jesus makes peace of the hostility between Jew and Gentile, but as the other epistles like Galatians and Colossians make clear, this also applies to other dividing walls that threaten to split apart the one new man that God is making. Whether race or ethnicity, or sex, or class, God's people must not be separated by these realities, because there is a deeper unity in the cross of Christ.

The Church of Christ must bear witness to this unity, and her impact on the world is most powerful when she is most successful at demonstrating this unity. If churches are divided by race or class or sex or doctrine, then the world cannot see the effects of the cross! Our divisions make the cross invisible, and they cut God's one new man into pieces, bringing back from the dead the hostility that Jesus killed at the cross!

Ultimately, *the* Church cannot fail, because she has the Spirit of God, and because Jesus was victorious at the cross, but here's the thing: individual churches or churches in the same zip code or various denominations can be severed from Christ, as Galatians 5 says. If you try to cut others off, God will cut you off! Christ has come to break down dividing walls, and so if you have departed from the apostles' blueprint and built a wall right through the middle of the kitchen, then Jesus will come and smash you!

And we have examples of this, both in the Bible and in Church history. In Galatians 2, Peter builds a wall between Jew and Gentile, and Paul has to come knock it down. In Acts 6, the Church wasn't taking care of the Gentile widows, and this led the Church to appoint deacons to go and smash that wall.

And in the Church, there are some obvious walls needing to be broken down: our unity is established by faith in Christ alone, and yet some parts of the church insist that you aren't really a part of the church unless you also submit to the bishop of Rome. Until very recently in this country, there were wicked barriers that kept black and white brothers and sisters from full fellowship with each other, with segregated seating and separate access to the Lord's Table. That wall has officially been torn down, but the division that came as a result hasn't been fully healed yet. I'm also tempted to add the wall that separates our baptized children from the Lord's Table, a wall that I'm very grateful that our denomination is joyfully smashing.

And so as we look at our congregation, I'm delighted to see a number of walls broken down: there are no walls here between young and old, between men and women, between families and singles, and so on. When it comes to class, we're doing okay, although things could be better: we're mostly rich, college-educated people, and it wouldn't be immediately apparent that the desperately poor are welcome to join us without money or price. They *are* welcome; but it isn't as obvious as it could be.

Where we struggle most of all is to demonstrate that our church is not just for white people. Again, all people are *welcome* here, but not all people *are* here, and so our unity is *verbal*, not *visible*. We say it, but we don't see it very clearly if at all. We're not sinfully excluding others, but our witness isn't what we hope that it one day will be.

Our church is what it is because you are who you are – your relationships, friendships, values, etc. So in light of this passage, I urge you to think about how your family can take steps that will help make our unity in Christ visible, dividing walls that you can help knock down. I'm not talking about having token representation or meeting quotas, or anything like that. I'm talking about deliberating seeking ways in which we can be joined together into one new man with those who are different from us, as a demonstration of what Jesus did through His cross.

One caution though: everyone loves this idea of breaking down dividing walls, but some walls aren't *dividing* walls; they are *structural, load-bearing* walls. If they come down, the whole house comes down! Some people are teaching that God's law against perverted sexual behaviors is a dividing wall that needs to be knocked down. Some people think that church discipline creates dividing walls. Some argue that by not allowing women to serve as elders, a sinful barricade has been erected in the church. But these things are all part of the foundation that the apostles gave us. We can't smash them without bringing the whole Church crashing to the ground.

Still others claim that certain *preferences* become dividing walls: your worship style doesn't make me feel welcome, you quoted a guy I don't like in your sermon, you have Sunday school, you don't have Sunday school, you serve alcohol in communion, and so on. But every congregation has to make a thousand particular decisions that not everyone will like, and these sorts of prudential decisions are not about *erecting walls*; they're simply a matter of *arranging the furniture*, and we need to be able to tell the difference in order to maintain peace.

We also need to measure wisely – not every local church will be endlessly diverse! A house church in China won't have many African subsistence farmers; a Kazakh church won't have American college grads. But the more diverse our community is, the more that diversity should be caught up into the unity of the Church in that community. Our culture is all about diversity for diversity's sake, but the Church is all about diversity being joined into a new unity, showing forth the power of the gospel to reconcile and bring peace.

This means that the way to see unity, reconciliation, and peace is not social engineering; it is *preaching gospel peace* and *knocking down any dividing walls* other than faith in Jesus. So, building on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Jesus as our cornerstone, let us ask the Spirit to join us together with all the saints as we grow into a holy temple in the Lord.

- *In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, Amen.*