

"Breaking Down the Walls"

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¹¹So then, remember that at one time you Gentiles by birth, called "the uncircumcision" by those who are called "the circumcision" — a physical circumcision made in the flesh by human hands — ¹²remember that you were at that time without Christ, being aliens from the commonwealth of Israel, and strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world. ¹³But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ. ¹⁴For he is our peace; in his flesh he has made both groups into one and has broken down the dividing wall, that is, the hostility between us. ¹⁵He has abolished the law with its commandments and ordinances, that he might create in himself one new humanity in place of the two, thus making peace, ¹⁶and might reconcile both groups to God in one body through the cross, thus putting to death that hostility through it. ¹⁷So he came and proclaimed peace to you who were far off and peace to those who were near; ¹⁸for through him both of us have access in one Spirit to the Father. ¹⁹So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are citizens with the saints and also members of the household of God, ²⁰built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the cornerstone. ²¹In him the whole structure is joined together and grows into a holy temple in the Lord; ²²in whom you also are built together spiritually into a dwelling place for God. (Eph. 2:11-22)

This text was written to two very different groups who were trying to come together in Christ. The two groups were essentially opposites. On one side you had "the circumcision," Jewish Christians who bore in their flesh the mark that had defined the children of God since Abraham's day. On the other side was "the uncircumcision," which was pretty much every other Christian. The two groups had Christ in common, but on most days it must have felt that that was about the only thing they had in common. The two sects came from very different histories and very different cultures. They cherished different religious practice and held different ideologies and theologies. One group was the old guard, the traditional power brokers, the ones who were used to holding the strings. The other group was comprised of the upstarts, the newbies, the johnny-come-latelies. Brought together by a Christ who had prayed that all of his followers would be one — that somehow they could learn to share the same mind, and be of one accord in Christ — these two groups were struggling to figure out a new, mutually acceptable agreement for sharing power.

When I was practicing law, one of the things I learned was that there was nothing more difficult to draft, nothing more challenging to delineate in words, than how two groups might share power. I saw it most clearly in the formation of new property development companies in situations where one group owned an attractive piece of land but another group had the development expertise — the skill to build something valuable, market it effectively, and sell it profitably. To complete a successful project, each group needed the other. The developers couldn't do anything without the land, but the land owners needed the savvy of someone who had done this before. And I knew that, as we worked to bring these two parties together and make it all happen, there would come a point when both sides would have to be willing to take some risk. Each group would have to trust the other in some ways that made them uncomfortable, perhaps even vulnerable. And sometimes that never happened.



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In the case of the early church, these social divisions were reinforced by actual, physical walls. The Jerusalem temple, for example, had several courtyards that surrounded the central Holy Place. The outermost area, called the Court of the Gentiles, was where Gentile believers could enter the temple grounds and mingle with faithful Jews. But they could only go so far as the Beautiful Gate, through which only ritually pure Jewish people could pass. That gate opened onto the Court of Women, which was as close as a faithful Jewish woman could get to the Holy Place. Beyond that lay a gate through which only Jewish men could pass to enter the Courtyard of the Israelites. Within that area, there was a boundary beyond which only priests could go. Then there were the doors to the Holy Place, where only certain functioning priests could pass to offer the priestly sacrifices. And the final barrier was a heavy, intricately crafted curtain erected to separate the Holy Place from the Holy of Holies, the seat of God's presence. The only person who could ever pass through that curtain was the High Priest, and even he could only go in there once a year on Yom Kippur to offer the annual atonement sacrifice. All of these walls and barriers separated the people of God into classes with varying levels of power and varying levels of access to God.

And these barriers really could be, to borrow the phrase of Ephesians, "walls of hostility." A number of years ago, archaeologists excavating the original wall of the outermost court revealed an inscription in the wall that read "Whoever is captured past this point will have himself to blame for his subsequent death."¹ That would have been a clear indication to any non-Godfearing person that passing through that wall could be a very dangerous thing. A Jewish woman didn't need a sign to know that she risked death if she dared to enter the all-male courtyard, nor would an Israelite man who considered crossing into a priestly area. These cultural and religious barriers were guarded and enforced with violence, even hostility.

Which brings us to the radical message of Ephesians, which says boldly that those kinds of barriers no longer apply in the reign of Christ. For "*now in Christ Jesus,*" the letter says, "*you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ. For he is our peace; in his flesh he has made both groups into one and has broken down the dividing wall, that is, the hostility between us.*"

What does this mean for us, as people who are trying to follow this Christ who comes to be our peace, the One who offers to us — we who were once so "far off" — the chance to be "brought near" to the Holy of Holies, the very seat of God's presence and power? We need to be reminded regularly of how incredible a gift this really is — to be cleansed, forgiven, welcomed, and loved by God even though we have done nothing to deserve it. This is the nature of grace. We need it and we crave it.

But this gift of grace comes with a challenge. The letter says, "Welcome, Christian, come on through the gate... but check your claims to power at the door. Check your claims to special status at the door. You are welcome in this new community of faith, but know as you enter that this new household of God is a new humanity. There are no strangers in here, no aliens in here, no enemies in here. Just people who share a common need for grace. In here, in this spiritual "dwelling place for God," all of the dividing walls have come a tumblin' down.

As humans, we love to hear about the grace, the welcome, the good news of our reconciliation to God. It is harder for us to hear that we might be expected to give

¹ <https://www.tvcresearch.net/resource-library/articles/the-dividing-wall-is-gone>

something up to be fully part of the new reality created in that grace. I think that is why the author of this letter to the Ephesians knew this was an important part of the message, that he needed to remind the church in Ephesus and beyond that the old walls couldn't stay up in new human family created by Christ. The Jewish Christians receiving that letter had to hear the difficult news that they would have to give up their old conceptions of the law. That meant, in many ways, they would have to give up their old conceptions of wealth, status, and privilege.

The Gentile Christians hearing that letter would know that they would have to give something up, too. Just because salvation would no longer depend on the obedience of certain laws did not mean that everything was now healthy and permissible. Life in Christ has never been an "anything goes," "whatever makes you happy" kind of endeavor. As disciples, our actions in this world matter, for they reflect on the God we serve. The things we say matter. The way we treat others matters. The ways we use our money and our time, and the way that we share our money and our time, these things matter. So, certain practices of Gentile culture, especially those affiliated with pagan nations or Canaanite religions, could no longer be embraced.

In case anyone might miss the centrality of this point, God did an amazing thing as Christ hung on the cross. In the very moment that Jesus breathed his last, at the exact second that he gave up his spirit, that fancy curtain that kept everyone out of the Holy of Holies, the glorious tapestry of fine twisted linen and blue, purple, and crimson yarns, which was hung with clasps of gold,² was torn in two from top to bottom. As the tear ripped down the center of that fabric wall, the earth shook, rocks split in two, tombs were opened, and the presence of God burst out into the world, never to be shut up again (Matthew 27:50-52). It was God's way of saying, "I don't need walls anymore; and neither do you."

As we ask ourselves what we are willing to give up, and what walls we are willing to drop in our own lives in order to participate fully in the reign of Christ, I want to share a story that Fred Craddock used to tell about his annual Christmas trip back to his small west Tennessee hometown. Every year he would pay a visit to his old friend Buck, who owned a little cafe on Main Street. Craddock's tradition was always the same: he would order a cup of coffee and a piece of chess pie, and he and Buck would catch up as he ate.

One Christmas when Craddock to get his annual holiday sacrament from Buck, the café owner switched things up. "Come on," he said to Craddock, "let's go get a cup of coffee."

Craddock was confused. "What's the matter?" asked Craddock, "Don't you have coffee here? Isn't this a restaurant?"

"I don't know," Buck said sarcastically; "sometimes I wonder."

So Craddock followed him down the street, and they got a booth in another restaurant. There were not many people in this one. Craddock was still confused about why they were there.

Finally, Buck seemed to get to what was eating at him. "Did you see the curtain?" He did not look up from his cup of coffee as he spoke.

"Yes, Buck," he said. "I saw the curtain; I always see the curtain."

² Craddock, Fred B. "The Letter to the Hebrews." *New Interpreter's Bible Series*. Vol. XII. Nashville: Abingdon Press (1998), p. 58.

The curtain was a barrier that had always hung in Buck's restaurant, separating the front half of the café from the back half. White folks came in the front door from Main Street. Black folks came in from an alley in the back, and they knew they were supposed to stay behind the curtain.

Buck looked up with a pained face and said, "Fred, the curtain has got to come down."

"Good," Craddock said, "Pull her down!"

"That's easy enough for you to say," replied Buck. "You come in once a year and tell me how to run my business."

"Then leave it up," Craddock countered. He could tell his old friend was in a personal crisis. Finally Buck said, "Fred, if I take that curtain down, I lose my customers. If I leave that curtain up, I lose my soul!"³

There is, in the end, a choice. We still live with so many walls. Some are physical. Some are emotional. We erect them for all kinds of reasons. Most of them, it seems, are related to fear. And so the message for us is pretty much the same as it was for the Ephesians. We must remember that once we were without Christ. Once we were aliens. Once we were the ones on the other side of the wall, wishing we could get inside.

Now, Christ has changed all that. Now we are welcomed inside. Now we have been brought near. Now we are offered unending peace and security. It is an amazing gift.

But this gift comes with a new set of expectations. As we accept the gift of peace and security for ourselves, we are required to accept it for others as well. That means we might just have to give some things up. We might have to change how we look at things in this world. That is the price of new life in Christ. But as we do give those things up, we can be encouraged and comforted by a new sense of the peace that Christ brings, and remember that we *"are no longer strangers and aliens, but... citizens with the saints... members of the household of God, built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the cornerstone."*

So with courage, determination, peace and love, may we work to drop those walls of hostility that continue to separate us from one another, so that we might truly grow into that "holy temple in the Lord... built together spiritually into a dwelling place for God."

Amen.

³ <https://www.thefreelibrary.com/When+the+walls+come+tumbling+down%3A+Ephesians+2%3A11-22.-a0134257562>