

United in Christ
Ephesians 2:11-22
John Breon

Therefore, remember that formerly you who are Gentiles by birth and called "uncircumcised" by those who call themselves "the circumcision" (which is done in the body by human hands)—remember that at that time you were separate from Christ, excluded from citizenship in Israel and foreigners to the covenants of the promise, without hope and without God in the world. But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far away have been brought near by the blood of Christ.

For he himself is our peace, who has made the two groups one and has destroyed the barrier, the dividing wall of hostility, by setting aside in his flesh the law with its commands and regulations. His purpose was to create in himself one new humanity out of the two, thus making peace, and in one body to reconcile both of them to God through the cross, by which he put to death their hostility. He came and preached peace to you who were far away and peace to those who were near. For through him we both have access to the Father by one Spirit.

Consequently, you are no longer foreigners and strangers, but fellow citizens with God's people and also members of his household, built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the chief cornerstone. In him the whole building is joined together and rises to become a holy temple in the Lord. And in him you too are being built together to become a dwelling in which God lives by his Spirit.

When Congress declared independence on July 4, 1776, they also appointed a committee to develop a national seal. One was finally adopted in 1782. It includes a bald eagle with a scroll in its beak that reads *E Pluribus Unum*. That's one of the USA's traditional mottoes. It means "out of many, one" (<https://www.greatseal.com/mottoes/unum.html>; https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/E_pluribus_unum). That motto is on our money as well. The original vision of the USA was that people from various

nations would come together to form a new nation. Thirteen colonies would come together as one nation.

There's something similar going on in this passage in Ephesians. Only, it talks about God making one new humanity out of two. And God does that by bringing down what once separated two peoples.

Robert Frost wrote a poem titled *Mending Wall*. He tells about walking the fence line with his neighbor, repairing the stone fence that separates their farms. He playfully thinks about what makes the stones fall out of the wall and he says this line: "Something there is that doesn't love a wall/That wants it down."

That makes me wonder, what walls do we build to keep ourselves in and to keep others out? What walls divide our own hearts or separate what we believe from how we behave? What divides a person from another person or a group of people from another group?

And what is it that doesn't love those walls, that wants them down? What keeps undermining them and toppling them, despite our efforts to keep the stones piled up and the walls in place?

As Paul writes to these Christians in and around Ephesus, he reminds them about a wall that once divided non-Jews from Jews. The people Paul is writing to are mainly non-Jews, that is, Gentiles. Again, as in the first part of the chapter, he reminds them of their life before they were in Christ. He lists five things they missed out on because they were outside God's people, Israel, and God's saving purposes.

They were separated or apart from Christ, the Messiah. They didn't share the hope of a coming deliverer and ruler.

They were separated from the commonwealth of Israel. This means they weren't part of the chosen people of Israel. So they were outside the sphere of God's choosing and had no covenant relationship with God.

They were strangers or foreigners to the covenants of promise. They didn't share in the covenants that promised the salvation Messiah would bring.

They were without hope. Probably this refers to the specific hope of Israel in the promised salvation of Messiah. It might also refer to the hope of resurrection. Some say that at the time Paul wrote this, the Greeks'

golden age, the best of their civilization, was behind them. But the golden age for the Jews was still in the future. And those ancient Greeks and Romans really had no hope beyond death. Only Jesus Christ in their lives could give them hope (see Col 1:27).

They were without God in the world. They worshiped many gods, but they didn't know the one true God.

All of this meant that those Gentiles were isolated. There was a wall that separated them from salvation and life. But, "Something there is that doesn't love a wall/That wants it down."

After World War II, Germany was divided and the capital city of Berlin was also divided into east and west. In 1961 the Soviets built the Berlin Wall to keep people from escaping into West Berlin and on into West Germany. That wall stood as a literal barrier, but also as a symbol of the "Iron Curtain," the division between eastern and western Europe. But in the 1980's the political world was changing. Things were beginning to open up. Ronald Reagan gave a speech in Berlin in 1987 and challenged the Soviet leader: "Mr. Gorbachev, tear down this wall!" And behind the scenes Christians were praying for peace and openness and freedom. Then, in 1989, the Berlin Wall came down. Many of us recall the scenes on the news of people tearing into that wall with sledgehammers and other tools. The Berlin Wall's fall meant the reunification of Germany and was a symbol of the end of hostilities called the Cold War.

Fred Craddock tells about when he was studying in Germany during the years that the wall was still standing. One evening he was on a train and struck up a conversation with an elderly German woman. He said that he was going to Stuttgart. She told him that she was going to Rostach, which was in Communist Germany. Fred asked, "Are you a Communist?" She said, "No, I'm a Christian." He said, "I'm a Christian." Then he said, "I'm from America." She said, "I know."

"What's it like to be a Christian in Communist Germany?"

"What's it like to be a Christian in America?" she asked. "My grandchildren call America the happy land."

Fred said, "It's not too happy lately." It was the late 1960's, and the US had assassinations and riots and other terrible things. "America's not a happy land now."

She said that it really was because in America "you don't throw old women away." And she explained that when she got her papers to go outside Communist zones for one month to visit her grandchildren, she asked the officer, "What if I don't come back?" And he said, "Oh, you'll be back, you have family here. But even if you don't, who cares? You're just an old woman."

Fred said, "Well, no, we don't do that in America." She had a music box she had bought that played "Silent Night." She wound it up and they sang together.

Fred had a sandwich he had bought at the train station. He tried to break it apart to share with her. But the bread was hard and he was struggling to break it. Finally he tore off some of it to hand to her. He hadn't noticed that in the meantime she had peeled an orange and was handing half of it to him. Half a sandwich, half an orange. They talked of being Christian in Germany and in America. They got to Stuttgart. "God go with you."

"And God go with you." I could have sworn we had communion on the train. The menu is the same in every church. One half sandwich, one half orange; it's the Christian way. I thought of her tonight. In fact, I thought about her so much that I got to thinking how far it is from Springfield, MO [where he was speaking], to Rostach, Germany. Do you have any idea how far that is, how many hundreds, how many thousands of miles it is? From Springfield to Rostach. Do you know how far it is? I checked the atlas. It's across that table. That's how far it is. (*Craddock Stories* 56-8).

"Something there is that doesn't love a wall/That wants it down."

After describing the division and separation of Gentiles from Jews, Paul says, "*But now* in Christ Jesus...." And what has happened in Christ Jesus is that Gentiles, who were once far away from God and God's

promises and God's covenant and God's people, those who were far away have been brought near by the blood of Christ. The sacrifice of Jesus on the cross not only brings us back to God, it brings us close to each other. And there's level ground beneath that cross. We meet there on level ground, on equal footing—all of us depending on God's grace.

Paul goes on: "Christ himself is our peace." He doesn't just make peace or give peace. He is peace. To be in Christ is to know peace—peace with God, peace as wholeness and well-being, and peace with each other.

The dividing wall, the hostility between Jew and Gentile—Jesus has broken it down. One way Jesus broke down that wall was by "abolishing the law," that is the Jewish law. That was what made Jews distinctive. Their observance of the law separated them from everybody else. Now, Paul says, it's gone. Jesus did away with it as a means of separation. The Law no longer separates Jews and Gentiles. Paul says in Romans 8:4 that the righteous requirements of the law are fulfilled in those who live according to the Holy Spirit. The Spirit leads us in the paths of righteousness for the sake of God's name and the Spirit fulfills the intent of the law in our lives.

Anyone and everyone can come to God through Jesus. The old divisions are gone. God has brought Jew and Gentile together as one new person in Christ. Those who are in Christ, believers in Christ, are a new creation. Some in the early Church called Christians a third race—not Jew, not Gentile, but God's new people.

A New Testament scholar named George Guthrie was teaching pastors in Nazareth. His class was about half Jewish and half Arab. The focus of the class was the gospel. And they came together around the good news of Jesus. One evening, one of the Arab pastors, who was from Nazareth, asked George if he'd like to tour the town. He said he would. In the lobby, they ran into three of the Jewish pastors who decided to go with them. So an Arab, three Jews, and an American went walking through Nazareth at 9:30 in the evening. George says it sounds like the beginning of a joke.

They wound up at the Basilica of the Annunciation—the church that's built on the traditional site where Mary got word she would be mother of the Messiah and where Jesus grew up. The church was closed, so they

stood outside looking at it and talking. Two older Arab men, along with the daughter of one of them, walked up. One of these Arabs was a tour guide. He started giving them the history of the church and the area. After a while, the other Arab man said to the Arab pastor, "You're Arab and they're Jewish. What's up with that?" He wasn't offended, just curious. All of the pastors answered together at once: "Because of Yeshua!" That is, Jesus united them (*In the Studio with Michael Card* 6/29/20).

And, it's in the cross that Jesus brings us together and makes us new. He is our peace and he also proclaims peace to those who were far off and those who were near. It's through Christ that all of us have access in one Spirit to the Father. By breaking down the dividing wall, Jesus creates one new humanity in one body with one Spirit.

What walls do we keep building? Who do we try to shut out? What divisions are there between people today? Jesus is out to bring down those walls.

Craddock again tells about when he used to go home to west Tennessee, where one of his old high school friends had a restaurant. This was probably the 1950s or early 60s. "Buck" was his friend's name. Fred would go home for Christmas, "Merry Christmas, Buck," and he'd get a piece of pie and cup of coffee free. Every year it was the same.

But one year, Fred went in and said, "Merry Christmas, Buck." And Buck said, "Let's go for coffee."

"What's the matter? Isn't this the restaurant?"

"I don't know. Sometimes I wonder."

They went somewhere else for coffee. Pretty soon Buck said, "Did you see the curtain?"

"Buck, I saw the curtain. I always see the curtain."

What he meant by *curtain* is this: They have a number of buildings in that little town, called shotgun buildings. They're long buildings and have two entrances, front and back. One's off the street, and one's off the alley, with a curtain and the kitchen in the middle. His restaurant is in one of those. Back then if you were white, you came off the street; if you were black, you came off the alley.

"Did you see the curtain?"

"I saw the curtain."

Buck said, "The curtain has to come down."

"Good. Bring it down."

"That's easy for you to say. Come in here from out of state and tell me how to run my business."

"Okay, leave it up."

"I can't leave it up."

"Well, then take it down."

"I can't take it down." He was in terrible shape. After a while he said, "If I take that curtain down, I lose business. If I leave that curtain up, I lose my soul" (61).

"Something there is that doesn't love a wall/That wants it down." Are we beginning to see what it is, who it is, that doesn't love a wall?

God in Jesus Christ has broken down the wall dividing people. Through the cross of Jesus those who were far away are brought near. Groups that once were separated are made into a new creation. We're brought into the one body of Christ and given the one Spirit of God.

Now, Paul says, you who were Gentiles are no longer strangers and aliens. Instead, you are fellow citizens with God's people. Not only that, you are members of God's household. Not only that, God's household is built on the foundation of apostles and prophets who teach and bear witness to Jesus Christ who is the cornerstone of God's building. We're joined together, built up in line with who Jesus is and what he's done. We're growing into a holy temple in the Lord, built together to become a dwelling in which God lives by his Spirit.

God has made a new people that he lives in through the Holy Spirit. In Christ, we are God's temple. Together as the church we are God's dwelling place.

Though the walls of separation have come down, there are some boundaries. It's *in Christ* that we are God's people, that we experience God's blessings, that we know God in an intimate and personal way. But in

Christ, in the body of Christ, it's impossible to be reconciled to God without also being reconciled to everyone who is in Christ (Dale Moody, *The Word of Truth* 331).

"Something there is that doesn't love a wall/That wants it down."
Jesus, through the Holy Spirit, will keep undermining and knocking down the walls we try to maintain between ourselves and other members of the body of Christ.

Be reconciled to God. Come near to God through Christ in the Holy Spirit—and discover that the closer we get to Jesus, the closer we get to each other.