

## ONE IN CHRIST

*Ephesians 2:11-22*

Have you ever noticed how quick we are to build walls. The Great Wall of China. Hadrian's Wall. The Berlin Wall. The wall around Palestinian areas in Israel. Gated communities. Walls are a standard answer to many questions. The purpose of these walls is security, containment and division, that is to divide. "This is my side, that is your side." Of course, not all walls are physical constructions. Our own society is riddled with walls and barriers of many sorts – money, education, social background, gender, age, sexual orientation, race, religion – but they share one thing in common – some are on one side, and some are on the other. It is often the case that crossing these walls is as difficult, if not more so, than crossing any of the physical barriers that we raise.

In these verses from Ephesians 2 Paul draws our attention to one such wall. He doesn't speak of its origins or tell us why such a barrier existed only that there was a 'dividing wall of hostility' (14) between Israel and the other nations. Reading the Old Testament it would seem that such a barrier was not part of God's intention. He had called his people to build bridges, not walls, but over the generations those who were supposed to be lights to the nations had become isolated, insulated and considered themselves as superior to those outside their walls. Because God's people had not fulfilled their calling this had left the nations in a dark place. They were, "Excluded from citizenship in Israel and foreigners to the covenants of the promise, without hope and without God in the world." (12) This had terrible consequences. Cut off as they were, "They [were] darkened in their understanding and separated from the life of God because of the ignorance that [was] in them due to the hardening of their hearts. Having lost all sensitivity, they [gave] themselves over to sensuality so as to indulge in every kind of impurity, and [were] full of greed." (4:18f)

But this was never God's plan or intention, so when the time was right (Romans 5:6) Christ died. He did this so that through his sacrifice he might set aside... the law with its commands and regulations. His purpose was to

create in himself one new humanity out of the two, thus making peace. (15) In Christ God brings to a climax his great work of reconciliation. But we should be careful not to read Paul's words in these verses through the distorting lens of dispensationalism. This is not a description of a religio-political arrangement between the people of the old covenant and of the new. Such a limited reading misses the point. God's purpose was not to set up a new system that would work in tandem with the old, as if he now had two sets of chosen people. He made the two groups one and has destroyed the barrier, the dividing wall of hostility... His purpose was to create in himself one new humanity out of the two, and in one body to reconcile both of them to God through the cross, by which he put to death their hostility. (14-16)

As a consequence of this, Paul says, we are no longer foreigners and strangers, but fellow citizens with all God's people and also members of his household. We are, as it were, a single building, a holy temple, that is in the process of being built together to become a dwelling in which God lives by his Spirit. (19-22) Together, all God's people, united under Christ who is the chief cornerstone (20), continue God's historic mission, which is, "Through [Jesus] to reconcile to himself all things, whether things on earth or things in heaven, by making peace through his blood, shed on the cross." (Colossians 1:20). And like his people of old, we are called to take that message of reconciliation into all the world (2 Corinthians 5:17-20).

We must take to heart the call to share in God's mission of reconciliation. Ancient Israel failed in their calling because they saw themselves as the sole recipients of God's favour. The nations, those outside the wall, were Gentile sinners, to be castigated and shunned, lest they contaminate the purity of God's people. We too are quick to raise our own barriers. We want to keep at arm's length those who don't meet our criteria – those who don't see things quite the way we see them, those who don't know how to behave in ways acceptable to us, those who believe differently or those who have different standards or a different understanding of what is right and wrong. We are not called to believe every whim or fancy that passes through our society. Rather, we are called to be salt, light and yeast, but we do this within the God-given ministry of reconciliation. We do this as ambassadors of Christ, that is, in his name, following his example and doing and speaking as he would do and speak.

It is sad that much that has been done and said in Jesus name over recent years has done the exact opposite of furthering God's mission to reconcile all things to himself. It has divided us from the world, and often from each other. Like ancient Israel we have become wall builders instead of bridge builders, more concerned about legal definitions than making peace. Let's hear Paul's words, not as instructions given to people lost in the mists of time, but as a word to you and me today as we follow the one who came to bring peace and reconciliation to a broken and divided world.

Amen.

Kevin Dare

Beeston Baptist Church

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