

**Breaking Down the Walls**  
**Ephesians 2:14-16**  
Sunday, February 3, 2019

The 21st Century has many challenges but none more daunting than maintaining the unity and peace of the church. Paul gave much attention to this subject in all his letters. He continually charges his churches to seek each other's interests and benefits while trying to live out the call of the love of Jesus. Sometimes he goes as far to say that he wants them to be like him. He has worked sacrificially and diligently to secure their faith and to bring them out of a life of self-interest to a greater life for the good and he wants them to do the same. He believes that a good life involves breaking down walls of ethnicity, nation and cultural status. His language is often direct and poetic, but what he is trying to accomplish and to make plain to them is that they need to, "Stop moping around because you didn't get your way. It isn't about you, it is about Jesus. Therefore, shape up and get busy living out the cross which brought us all together to fulfill the will of God." The letter that addresses this issue most profoundly is Ephesians. From start to finish this letter is about "how to maintain the unity of the church in the midst of differences."

Divisions are always present in communities; there is always another way to see a problem, a way of processing an idea or the future in general. Sometimes it causes hard feelings, but other times it does not. But Paul is not talking about these common divisions that are often dealt with through conversation and a decision-making process; he is talking about more profound divisions that tap into our deep prejudices. Most of what Paul is dealing with, and consequently admonishes his congregation for, is the racial prejudice that can only be dealt with by a spiritual renewal. The reason it can only be dealt with by a deep spiritual renewal is that racial prejudice arises from an irrational place that hasn't the capacity to reason or to reflect. Prejudice rarely is eradicated by reason, it is mostly turned upon its head by an experience of grace and humanity.

Paul begins his argument against irrational prejudice that leads to divisions, in his letter to the Ephesians, at the most logical place for Christians---the cross. He says, "Jesus died on the cross to break down the dividing wall between all people." In other words, Jesus tore down the reasons for our divisions, so stop looking for ways to divide yourselves. The most natural way of reading this statement is that when Jesus died on the cross, he demolished the wall of separation in the

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temple between Jews and Gentiles. His meaning is that Jesus is now the one who fills the temple with the presence that can save them. Jesus destroys the curtain that separated humanity, between Jew and Gentile. Jesus now fills it up with salvation for all. He also made faith the key element of walking with God and not the law. Therefore, we are all on equal footing with no one deserving more honor than the next.

It is important to recognize that he did not begin with a statement of ideological agreement, but with the fact that Jesus died for us and destroyed the dividing wall between Jew and Gentile. The temple, of which Jesus is now the proprietor, is open for all humanity. Prejudice is now off limits as a spiritual direction. Unity isn't about everyone agreeing on something, it is maintaining the respect, love and compassion for each person. Maintaining the unity of Christ is not about everyone agreeing on the same thing, it is about maintaining each other's dignity in the face of disagreement. Name calling is out of the question. It defeats the purpose of the cross.

If the church has a role to play in the 21st Century it is helping our politicians, business men and women, and the leaders of communities maintain differences with dignity. We don't have to win our point by destroying the other. That only proves your ambition. But to win your point by argumentation and patient deliberation is something that lasts much longer, because it means you have won more than your argument, you won a friend. Resorting to cheap character slurs and starting rumors is beneath the dignity of the cross. In fact, it nullifies it.

When Paul advises us to "maintain the unity," he is really saying, "keep the dignity" between all human beings. Even if you are being prophetic you don't have to demean the group or person you are addressing. You must show that you love them, in order for them to listen to you. Only then is change and embrace possible.

In this powerfully charged political world the church must rise above the chatter. When the church succumbs to name calling and cheap character slurs it loses its hope for the world, because it proves that it is no different. Our task is to build the characteristics of peace within us so that when an issue comes around that we must speak to, we are able to address the opposition with as much dignity as Jesus would. If we don't, we justify what others do in the name of selling their point, but in the end are only serving their ambition.

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