
A wall is not a building

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Abstract. We are naturally inclined to divide humanity into two categories: “us” and “them,” and “they”—the other group—are perceived as a threat to “us.” For this reason, people build not only physical walls but also invisible barriers by which they seek to protect their identity. Referring to the conflict between Jewish and Gentile Christians, the author of the Letter to the Ephesians argues that such dividing walls are created by hostility, and that hostility itself is rooted in legalism. The moment we make salvation dependent on “commandments expressed in ordinances,” we begin to rebuild those dividing walls, abolish Christ’s work of reconciliation, and arbitrarily exclude the “other” group from salvation. Yet, as Viktor Kókai Nagy argues, there is another kind of building in which we may participate if we entrust ourselves to the Holy Spirit. We ourselves become the living building blocks of God’s dwelling place—the Church. And here the walls are of a very different kind, for this is a building that is capable of growing and continually expanding.

Keywords: Ephesians; dividing wall; hostility; reconciliation; legalism; Jewish Christians and Gentile Christians; church; Holy Spirit; Christian identity

It is natural for us, human beings, to build walls. We take shelter behind them from the hardships of nature, we surround our cities and protect national borders with them. Walls have proven to be an extremely useful invention over the centuries, so much so that it is easy to forget that the first walls were built by Cain (Gen 4:17). At the same time, readers of the Bible know well that walls alone—however solid they are—do not provide real protection; they can be torn down, and the city they defend

can be conquered and destroyed. And this is true not only of physically constructed walls, but of those inner dividing walls by which we seek to protect our identity.

“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.” (Eph 2:11–22; NIV)

Discussing an ancient example of hostility in Christ’s congregation thousands of years ago, the Letter to the Ephesians also speaks of walls and buildings. For today’s Bible-readers the conflict between Jews and Gentiles—this tension about being or not being circumcised—seems distant and of little relevance. Yet these groupings are interchangeable: they can just as easily be replaced by liberals and fundamentalists, the weak and the strong, the timid and the confident. What matters, therefore, is not the labels we attach to conflicting groups, but how we respond to the presence of those within our communities who hold different views on certain questions. Maybe – not overstretching the elasticity of the text – they have different views on how to connect to the community surrounding us, in more expansive terms, to the world in which we live.

Jews and Gentiles

The letter to the Ephesians was not written by Paul. It belongs to the Deutero-Pauline Letters, to use a theological term. What does this mean? It certainly does not imply a value judgement, as if the text was less important or less authoritative than any other New Testament writing. Nor does it justify setting its teaching against that of the apostle’s undisputed letters. Its only purpose is to situate the text within its own historical context in order to understand its message more precisely.

Paul’s mission was often attacked because he reached out to the Gentiles with the gospel of Jesus, insisting that Gentiles can belong to Christ in their own right. Most

of the attacks came from Jews who also confessed Christ, but they believed that the Gentiles first had to convert to Judaism before they could become followers of Jesus.

This conflict is central in the Letter to the Galatians, where Paul rebukes the congregation for imposing laws on Gentile Christians which had failed to bring even the Jews to salvation. He accuses them of endangering the freedom in Christ, and the salvation through grace apart from the law.¹

Only faith in Christ has the power to save—this was Luther’s great insight which became the founding principle of the Reformation.

However, when we read the Letter to the Ephesians, we see a very different picture; here it is not the Gentiles who need protection from the Jews, but the other way around. The writer addresses the letter to Gentile Christians. He wants them to understand that hostility is not an option, for Christ has torn down the dividing barriers. As the Gentiles constitute the majority of the congregation, we can assume that the letter was written a couple of decades later. Another indication of this is that the community is described as built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets. The apostles appear as great figures of the past, while prophets are the teachers of the next generation. The author of the letter, who must have been part of the school founded by Paul, adapts the apostle’s teachings to this new situation; he warns the community not to repeat the mistake the Jews made earlier. Hostility based on legalism inevitably carries the danger of excluding certain people from salvation. Some may even be denied citizenship. According to the letter’s argument, we cannot treat anyone as stranger or foreigner in the community because all are fellow citizens.

After all, what makes someone a foreigner or a stranger? It is the law—the law with its commandments and ordinances—that provide the basis for hostility, even though we may look to it for protection.

Past and Present

To drive his point home, the author reminds his Gentile readers that they were once separated from Christ and excluded from Israel because of the law. More precisely, they could not belong to Christ, as Gentiles could only be foreigners and strangers in Israel. But now, you, my dear readers who were once far away—writes the author, who was probably a Jewish Christian—, have been brought near. You have become part of Israel through the blood of Christ. By reconciling the two peoples, the Jew and the Gentile, his death and resurrection have enabled them to walk the same path together. This was made possible only because he destroyed the dividing barrier, that is, hostility itself. To accomplish this, he abolished the law that had provided the foundation for hostility. The text leaves no doubt about the author’s meaning; for he explicitly speaks of “the law with its commands and regulations” (Eph 2:15). Therefore, the work of Christ not only abolishes the consequence—hostility—but everything that makes it possible. He destroys not only the superstructure of hostility

¹See: <https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Galatians/%203&version=NIV>

between people – which can be rebuilt – but the commandments and decrees of the law itself, on which it rests. He brings reconciliation not through laws,² but by becoming the new foundation of this peace: “he himself is our peace” (Eph 2:14). And he has brought peace not only among human beings, but he reconciled humanity with God, embracing all people regardless of being far from Israel or near, of being circumcised or Gentile. In the letter to the Ephesians, the church is where salvation takes place, this is where believers receive the gift of reconciliation.

Humans have always tended to divide people into two categories: “us” and “them.” In Judaism this distinction took the form of “us: Jews” and “them: Gentiles.” Gentiles, in turn, divided humanity into the categories of “us: civilized”, “them: barbarian.” After the destruction of the Temple (70 CE), Judaism, as a response to the great trauma, chose a path in which—out of a desire to protect the Torah and Jewish identity—it clung even more strongly to the Law and its commandments. Later, the rabbis came to see it as necessary to protect these commandments with an additional “fence” of further regulations.³ In other words, they did exactly what the author of the letter warns against. He bids his readers not to make this mistake, but to abandon this well-established, reassuring, and perhaps temporarily effective practice of wall-building. In the earliest period, it seems that this was indeed successfully accomplished.

“The multinational and -cultural community, which slowly integrated the barbarians, was really formed into one nation by Christian faith. A third clan, a *tercium genus* appeared.”⁴

Wall and Temple

Christianity cuts itself from its own roots if it chooses to build the wall of hostility, since this will inevitably be founded upon commandments and regulations – in other words, we recreate that which arises from human nature, yet stands in complete opposition to the reconciliation grounded in the cross. This is what the Letter to the Ephesians seeks to guard us against. Do not repeat the mistake made by the first generation of Jewish Christians, and then throughout history by many countries and communities who called themselves Christians.

If we can realize and accept that we are not foreigners and strangers but the fellow-citizens with the saints and God’s household, we can become part of a new process which is not initiated by us but happens to us. This process is not based on the Law but on the foundation laid by the apostles and prophets with Christ himself as the cornerstone, who guarantees its harmonious fitting together. According to some scholars, the word translated here as “cornerstone” can also mean keystone, as in the top stone of an arch, however, this meaning fits less well with the argument of

²About the topic of reconciliation see: Viktor KÓKAI-NAGY. “A megbékélés fogalma Pálnál,” *Studia Universitatis Babes Bolyai* no. 1 (2020): 61–82. (https://www.academia.edu/43986634/A_megbékélés_fogalma_Pálnál) <https://doi.org/10.24193/subbtref.65.1.04>

³See: <https://zsido.com/fejezetek/megyeri-jonatan-bun-es-buntetes-ereny-es-jutalom/>

⁴Ferenc Szűcs. “Teológiai etika,” (Budapest, 1993): 92.

the letter. After all, the central point is that hostility is grounded in the Law, which Christ has abolished by bringing peace and creating in himself a new humanity, the people belonging to Christ. Note that reconciliation is not grounded in humanity but in Christ himself. The law was unable to bring reconciliation, instead, it generated hostility. Another foundation was therefore necessary, which was laid down by the apostles and the prophets – but they could not have succeeded unless the cornerstone had already been given, which sets the direction, and guarantees stability. This foundation is not optional, but the only possibility (cf. 1Cor 3:10–15),⁵ since only in this way can stable walls be built.

But then do we have to build walls after all? Isn't the author contradicting himself here? Actually, no, as there is a crucial difference. Here it is we ourselves who are being built: "and in him you too are being built together to become a dwelling in which God lives by his Spirit" (Eph 2:22; NIV). We are the bricks in this construction. This also explains the otherwise striking claim that this building—the holy temple—is capable of growing.

In this temple, then, there is no justification for hostility as a dividing wall, since the identity of the church's members is not founded on the Law but defined by belonging to Christ.

Thus, the laws that once justified hostility also loses its force, and there is no need for the defence lines that commandments might erect around us. Every regulation intended to protect our sovereignty ultimately testifies to the absence—or at best the fragility—of what it seeks to defend. Indeed, hostility is a sign of fear or lack of trust in one's own faith and authenticity. This cannot be corrected by law. Hostility and separation are signs of a weakened identity.

"A responsible life is not identical with the ethics of detached purity. It is fundamentally participation in the reality to which we belong, the reality we take upon ourselves before Christ."⁶

Building barriers of hostility is not identical with building the walls of the temple. Let us acknowledge that the dividing barrier of hostility offers only us a false sense of security. It is a futile effort and a waste of time. We are not to build the dividing walls of hostility, but rely peacefully on the Spirit, through whom we are being built into the dwelling place of God.

⁵See: <https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=1/%20Corinthians/%203&version=NIV>

⁶FÜSTI-MOLNÁR Szilveszter, *Akinek mondja magát – és ami valójában*, 4. (https://www.academia.edu/168391694/Aminek_mondja_magat_FMSz?email_work_card=view-paper)