

## **The Broken Wall**

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One of the most potent symbols of man's perpetual frustration in the modern world has been a twenty-five mile-wide dagger driven deep into the heart of a brave but beleaguered city. Thrown up between midnight on August 12 and morning on August 13, 1961, the Berlin Wall was an outrage and effrontery to all who beheld it. Marching insolently across proud plazas, invading ancient cemeteries, sending roots of steel down into sewers, the Wall overnight created a concentration camp which condemned more than a million East Berliners to a collective claustrophobia. Like a jagged wound from a blunt weapon, the Wall literally amputated a great city in its mid-section, severing those vital arteries through which the oppressed could flow in their search for freedom. As a Berlin policeman put it, "The Wall is not just sad. It is not just ridiculous. It is schizophrenic."

And yet this "Wall of Shame" has been the most visible symbol of a vastly larger reality. Not only was it part of the hundred mile ring around West Berlin, sealing off that island of courage is a subcontinent of tyranny, but it also belonged to the 830 mile "Iron Curtain" guarding East Germany's western frontier from the Baltic to Czechoslovakia.

On the other side of the world a "Bamboo Curtain" now shrouds China in mystery as that enormous nation convulses with changes that may have fearful consequences for all mankind. Near to home, a "Velvet Curtain" of affluence drops protectively between the

flourishing suburbs and those pockets of poverty which fester in the ghettos. The "Sheepskin Curtain" separates a diploma elite from many not fortunate enough to gain a college education. Racial minorities still feel hemmed in by the "Jim Crow Curtain" of second class citizenship.

Ours is a wall-weary world searching for those liberating forces which can breach the battlements that confine and constrict the human spirit. In this quest for a wall-breaker, Christianity is in danger of coming out second best. All too often, we picture our Christ in passive categories: at Christmas he is a babe "asleep in the manger;" while at Easter he is an exalted Lord "seated at the right hand of the Father" in glory. Modern man will not readily see how a sleeping babe, a suffering lamb, or a sitting Lord can do much about those walls which stifle the human spirit.

In Ephesians 2:14 the apostle Paul provides a remarkably relevant category by which to consider the work of Christ. The central thrust of the entire ministry of Jesus is summarized in the explosive phrase, ". . . he has broken down the dividing wall of hostility." Here is a New Joshua who has breached, not the wall of Jericho, but those of the Jewish Temple, as the larger context makes clear (Ephesians 2:11-22). Paul does not express the wish that Christ could, or the hope that he will, but rather the confidence that he already has demolished those barriers which lay at the heart of his ancestral religion.

Is that same Christ able to destroy the "walls of hostility" which make men enemies in our day? To answer that question we must first rediscover just how he dismantled the walls of his own day. This will require a tour of the Temple precincts where those walls stood which symbolized in microcosm the walled-in world of Judaism in the first century. Essentially, the Jerusalem Temple was a Christian church turned inside out. Whereas we worship entirely within the building, using the outside only for landscaping and parking, the one place where the Jew never went was inside his Temple,

worshiping rather on the outside in a series of courtyards carefully circumscribed by a cluster of concentric walls.

## I.

Upon reaching the outer gates of the Temple precincts, a pilgrim would first enter the Court of the Gentiles, a large area reserved for non-Jews who worshiped Israel's God. Defining the boundaries of this enclosure was a five foot high balustrade on which were posted signs that archaeologists have been fortunate enough to recover. One of these inscriptions reads: "No foreigner (literally: 'one of another race') may enter within the fence and enclosure around the Sanctuary. Whoever is caught will have himself to blame for the death which will inevitably follow." The Gentile who ventured beyond this racial wall literally took his life in his own hands.

Lest we suppose this to be an exaggerated threat, remember an episode in the life of Paul recorded in Acts 21:27-32. There, on the merest suspicion that he might have encouraged a foreigner (Trophimus the Ephesian) to enter the Temple, the Apostle was dragged outside its inner area and would have been beaten to death had he not been rescued at the last moment by Roman soldiers. Even though Paul was himself a Jew, he could instantly inflame his countrymen to commit murder in the very shadows of the sanctuary by showing the slightest disrespect for the racial wall that kept non-Jews in the remotest "vestibule" of the Temple. Paul could point to scars on his own body for proof that this was indeed a "dividing wall of hostility."

Despite the fact that he was almost destroyed by the animosity which accumulated at that wall century after century, Paul was convinced that Christ had already demolished its effectiveness. What was the basis of this confidence? Jesus made no mention of circumcision, the rite which marked one as belonging to the people of God

simply by virtue of birth in a Jewish family. Instead, he championed "faith," a personal response to God which even a Roman centurion might make more adequately than any Jew (Matthew 8:10). With a disdain for the strictures of Jewish racial prejudice, Jesus penetrated to the sinner, the Syrophoenician, the Samaritan, the Roman soldier. When at last he made his supreme claim upon the Temple, no wonder he banished its holy hucksters from the Court of the Gentiles for their failure to make it "a house of prayer for all the nations" (Mark 11:17).

But this attack on the racial wall cost Jesus his life. Finally, the only charge which his enemies could make stick was the distorted accusation--which did contain a grain of truth--that he was trying to destroy their Temple (Mark 14:58, 15:29). Did Christ destroy the Wall, or did it destroy him? The faith that transcended race did not perish forever on the cross, but was soon risen to become the faith of his followers. The book of Acts tells how, slowly but surely, the disciples began to discover that the gospel could not be contained behind any of the racial walls erected to protect Judaism. Less than a generation after Jesus' death, Paul could look back on an accomplished fact and cry, "Neither Jew nor Greek . . . for you are one in Christ Jesus" (Galatians 3:28). It is an indisputable fact of early Christian history that a movement which began within the most profoundly racial religion in history quickly grew to become a universal religion which embraced every race, nation, and culture without distinction.

To be sure, Judaism had made progress in that direction. In response to a growing Old Testament conviction, a place had been provided for other races within the total Temple structure. The Jews would never say that a foreigner did not deserve to know God; they only insisted that he worship him from a distance, "in his place" on the outer periphery of the Temple precincts. The Christian difference was one of degree, of taking this beginning to its ultimate fulfillment by abolishing all

racial distinctions, not so much in earthly society where they might be very real, but "in Christ," in the life of His Body, the Church.

Like the Jews, we too have made solid progress in this direction. In fact, most Christian churches in America are filled almost entirely with non-Jews. How did we, as Anglo-Saxon Gentiles, get into the very heart of the sanctuary except that Christ long ago demolished the distinctions that would have condemned us to an inferior position? It is really ludicrous to realize that many white Southern Christians, who do not themselves qualify racially for the religion of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, have insisted that another non-Jewish race (Negro) could not join them beyond the racial barrier but would have to worship "in their place!"

The church which Christ died to free from all walls can never identify itself with any racial, national, or cultural group. It can never post a sign in its vestibule outlawing the "foreigner." It is common, for example, to refer to the Church of England or the Church of Scotland. This is a subtle but serious mistake. The New Testament speaks of the church in Corinth or the church in Rome. The church is to be in, but not of, the country where it lives. By its very nature, the Church can never become a Caucasian church, or an American church, or a Southern church. To make such racial, national, or cultural distinctions is to build back walls which Christ died to tear down.

## II.

Advancing, then, beyond the racial wall, the Temple pilgrim would move from the Court of the Gentiles to the Court of Women. Here was a "halfway house" reserved for the orthodox Jewish female whose privileges were greater than those of the foreigner but less than those of the Jewish male. She could draw nearer to the sanctuary than a non-Jew but was prevented from

going farther by a second wall which separated her from the Court of Israel. Thus the Jewish understanding of humanity's standing before God included not only a racial wall between Jew and Gentile but a sexual wall between male and female.

Essentially this wall symbolized the place of woman in Judaism as a second class religious citizen. At birth she did not undergo circumcision, the supreme rite of initiation into the Jewish commonwealth. She could not grow up to become a priest, a Levite, or a rabbi. She both worshiped separately in the Temple and occupied a segregated section of the synagogue. If single, she was expected to follow the religion of her father; if married, the religion of her husband. The contemporary Jewish historian, Josephus, remarked that "in every respect woman is inferior to man," a Jewish viewpoint to which Paul alluded in I Corinthians 11. In fact, the rabbis were accustomed to pray a daily prayer which included the petition, "I thank God that I was not born a woman."

But Paul, born and bred on these Jewish prejudices, somehow came to believe that the sexual wall had no place in the true Temple of God. Once again, Christ provided the basis for the dramatic change. By making faith rather than circumcision central to his message, he not only enabled a foreigner to stand on equal footing with a Jew but also a woman to experience religious equality with a man. To a desperate daughter of Israel who tugged at the tassel of his prayer shawl, Jesus replied, "Your faith has made you well" (Mark 5:34). Moreover, he demanded that women make their own religious commitment to him even if it shattered the solidarity of the family (Matthew 10:35; Luke 12:53). In response, women redeemed from many diseases formed a special band that accompanied him from Galilee, several of whom were so prominent that their names have become a part of the gospel record (Luke 8:2-3). It is disconcerting for men to remember that these women were the last at the cross in courage, the first at the tomb in love.

The new status conferred by Christ quickly became characteristic of the early Church. Women shared together with men in preparation for Pentecost (Acts 1:14). Their homes became the earliest house-churches of Jerusalem (Acts 12:12). In some cases, they became the founders of a new congregation, as at Philippi (Acts 16:13). Women assumed their rightful prominence in church leadership (Priscilla--Romans 16:3), sharing responsibility for the office of deacon ("Phoebe, a deaconess of the church at Cenchreae"--Romans 16:1) and rendering distinctive ministries to such groups as widows (I Timothy 5:3-16).

It is sometimes supposed that Paul was not sympathetic to sexual equality within the church because he enjoined women to silence in I Corinthians 14:34-35 (cf. I Timothy 2:11-12). A careful consideration of the context, however, shows that precisely the opposite inference should be drawn (I Corinthians 14:20-33). In the unstable and immature church at Corinth, Paul was addressing women who had become intoxicated with their new sense of freedom and were inexperienced in the use of their new-found opportunities for religious fulfillment. Because the church was so far ahead of the world in its attitude toward women, Paul cautioned them to be circumspect lest the outsider misunderstand their boldness (vs. 23-25). However, in the same I Corinthians he made it quite clear that the role of women included praying and prophesying (I Corinthians 11:5). For Paul the ultimate theological principle was never in doubt. Not only in Christ is there "neither Jew nor Greek," but also there is "neither male nor female" (Galatians 3:28).

Once again, let us give credit to Judaism where credit is due. This religion had gone a long way toward elevating the dignity of woman, strengthening the sanctity of her sex and stability of her home life. As with race, the Christian difference was one of degree. Because God, not man, determines both the race and the sex to which one is born, it is not for man arbitrarily to assign priorities and prejudices to factors over which he has no

control. Not only by creation but, as our text indicates, by the cross ("blood") of Christ are such distinctions abolished. Standing at Calvary, neither race nor sex matters any more in the approach to God.

Like the Jews of Jesus' day, we have made progress in the religious emancipation of women. A typical Christian church today finds both sexes seated together, usually in family units, for worship. A few women have been called to church staff positions, while more have served magnificently as foreign missionaries. Many women are no longer bound to the faith of their families, but feel free to make independent religious decisions as God guides them. Clearly we have lowered the wall of sexual distinction, but have we leveled it to the ground?

The Church, like Judaism, is still a man's world in many crucial areas. Though women may exercise a full gospel ministry, ordination is arbitrarily limited to males. In most Southern Baptist churches (though not in other Baptist bodies), deacons are almost invariably men. In many churches women give half or more of the money, yet finance and budget committees are almost exclusively a male domain. The power structure of the Southern Baptist Convention is drastically one sided; even agencies that have a very large responsibility to women have almost no female trustees on their boards. Although women have largely won political equality on the American scene, they still do not have proportionate representation in the decision making processes of the church. How tragically the church deprives itself of the spiritual resources available among women! For example, even though half of the people we are trying to win are female, our evangelistic programs and personnel are totally male dominated.

Ours is a day when women have been exploited more subtly yet cruelly than any generation in history. On every hand, the crass sensuality of our culture conspires to cheapen them as little more than playthings or servants whose mission in life is to bolster the male ego. Although



sexual tensions usually simmer beneath the surface, here is another wall where profound hostilities have gathered. Women need to discover in the church a climate of opinion and a quality of relationship which celebrates the glorious fact that God both made them and redeemed them as women.

The Gospel of Thomas discovered recently in Egypt closes with the request of Simon Peter, "Let Mary go out from among us, because women are not worthy of life." To this shocking suggestion the Gnostic tract makes Jesus reply, "I will make her male, that she too may become a living spirit, resembling you males. For every woman who makes herself male will enter the Kingdom of Heaven" (saying 114). It is high time that we condemn this heresy in the contemporary church!

### III.

If the Temple pilgrim were to move beyond the racial and sexual walls which restricted the Court of Gentiles and the Court of Women, he would finally enter the Court of Israel where orthodox, circumcised, law-abiding Jewish men were privileged to worship. Surely here, it might seem, would be an area without a wall, but, alas, one final barrier remained. Another low balustrade separated the Court of Israel from the Court of Priests where only the sons of Aaron who offered sacrifice were permitted to venture. Here stood a third imposing barrier, the vocational wall between priest and layman.

Although Judaism sponsored robust lay movements, such as the Pharisees, it was essentially a sacerdotal religion with a pyramid of power moving from the village priests up through the chief priestly families to the one supreme high priest. The layman brought his sacrifice to the Temple, but handed it over the wall to priests who then offered it on the altar. In this symbolic sense, Judaism fostered a proxy faith which interposed between man and God a human mediator arbitrarily

qualified by his ancestry. Of course, the layman was encouraged to be guided toward God by the symbolism which the priest enacted before his eyes, but this possibility was diminished by the chasm which lay between him and a hierarchy whose standards he could not meet.

For Paul, a Temple without walls meant that Christ had also broken the vocational barrier. A final look at the ministry of Jesus suggests how this happened. His forerunner, John the Baptist, was the son of a priest who repudiated his hereditary privileges to minister alone as a layman in the wilderness. When startled priests inquired regarding his authority to baptize, John appealed to God alone to vindicate his strange career. Jesus deliberately linked his ministry to that of the layman-prophet John. Again and again he provoked the religious Establishment to ask, "By what authority . . . ?" The controversy behind that question centered on the fact that he was not ordained; he had not attended the rabbinic academies; he was not a priest or the son of a priest; he did not have any ministerial credentials. The simple truth is that Jesus was a layman, as were those whom he recruited to be the foundation of his movement.

Christianity was launched as a lay movement and so it continued throughout the New Testament period. Not only was everyone a layman, but everyone was also a priest, for the work of the priesthood belonged to the vocation of faith. No longer did the worshiper watch as a priest offered his animal sacrifice. Instead, as Paul put it, every Christian was a priest offering himself as a "living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship" (Romans 12:1).

Nothing illustrates this transformation better than the claims which are central to the book of Hebrews. In Judaism, only a handful of priests on duty entered the holy place of the sanctuary, while only the high priest entered the innermost holy of holies once a year on the Day of Atonement. By contrast, Hebrews 6:19 proclaims

that every Christian "enters into the inner shrine behind the veil." This venture is described in Hebrews 10: "Therefore, brethren, since we have confidence to enter the sanctuary by the blood of Jesus, by the new and living way which he has opened for us through the veil . . . let us draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith . . ." (Hebrews 10:19-22). Here every Christian believer, however humble, boldly grasps the reality of God with a directness denied even the high priest in Judaism.

To be sure, Judaism had made some progress through its priesthood in penetrating the veil which guards the ultimate Mystery, but they had not been able to do so with the intensity claimed by the first Christians. Today, many who call themselves Christian are content to live in an outer court far removed from the "secret place of the Most High," depending on the work of a priest to mediate the presence of God. Even in Baptist life a growing professionalism of the clergy has opened a cleavage which is foreign to our faith in the "priesthood of every believer."

As is true once a wall is built, hostilities begin to gather. Clergymen become more and more jealous for the privileges of their office. Ordination assumes increasing importance and ministry is redefined by a managerial model in terms of the authority which one is able to exercise. Conversely, laymen feel pressured to carve out a separate sphere of influence for themselves, devising structures which will "keep the preacher in his place" by assigning him spiritual affairs while laymen supervise the temporal affairs of the church. Such cleavages do not reflect the New Testament understanding of ministry; hence they inevitably give rise to internal tensions.

It is time to recover in principle and in practice the Baptist conviction that every Christian is a minister, and that every ministry is both spiritual and temporal, both vertical and horizontal, both a service to God on behalf of man and a service to man on behalf of God. Clearly there are legitimate distinctions in function, based on a variety

of spiritual gifts, but there must not develop differences of status based on the inherent privileges of office. Minister and layman together must lead in worship, must win the lost, must distribute funds for the necessity of the saints, must undergird the mission of the church in prayer, must become competent interpreters of the written Word.

### Conclusion

We have defined the work of Christ as that of the Great Abolitionist, the New Joshua who batters down racial, sexual, and vocational walls. Some suppose that such issues are not crucial, that we should speak only of his "rending of the veil" between man and God. But the symbolism of our primary passage provides a needed corrective to this perspective. In the Temple which Paul knew, no one could enter the sanctuary until he could first get beyond the outer walls. Here is the supreme significance of our text: only as Christ breaks down the three outer walls are we able to enter all together into the presence of God. To keep the foreigner, the woman, or the layman back "in their place" is to keep them too far from God! The finished work of Christ permits an immediacy of divine encounter which cries with the hymn writer, "Nothing between my soul and the Saviour."

Ours is a wall-weary world where ugly fissures rend the human fabric of life. To the cynic it seems that such walls of hostility will stand forever. But walls can become obsolete even before they fall. It is quite possible that Paul wrote Ephesians around A.D. 62, just at the time when the Jews were finishing their Temple building program of the past eighty years. If so, this means that at the very moment when his countrymen were proudly laying the last stone in place in their magnificent Temple, Paul dared to write that these apparently monolithic walls had already begun to buckle, fatally undermined by the Christ who had challenged them a generation earlier.

Do we have the faith of Paul to believe that some of the most formidable barricades in life may be broken

down? Even our best built walls can quickly become obsolete. In the summer of 1967, the French offered their famed Maginot Line for sale. The pillboxes which once stood as the most impregnable defense against foreigners ever built were now purchased by Germans as summer homes which offered a picturesque view of the Rhine! Can we let Christ transform our walls of hostility into homes where former enemies are now welcome, reconciled by the blood of his cross?

Carl Sandburg framed the prayer which is an appropriate response to the truth of our text:

Lay me on an anvil, O God.  
Beat me and hammer me into a crowbar.  
Let me pry loose old walls.

(Prayers of Steel)