

Christ Has Broken Down the Wall!

Ephesians 2:11-22

The Presbytery of Charlotte

December 7, 1993

“Christ Jesus...has broken down the dividing wall of hostility.”¹ Can you hear that good news in that? Christ Jesus has broken down the dividing wall of hostility! That’s not a promise. That’s not good hope for the future. No, it’s written in the past tense: Christ Jesus has broken down the dividing wall! It’s a done deal. Finished. Complete. Accomplished. Taken care of. Signed, sealed, and delivered.

What a wonderful and powerful formulation of the gospel, at once ancient and contemporary! The gospel has to do with the facts of the work of God in Jesus Christ. We are not asked whether we like it. Our opinions are neither sought nor valued. It is not up to us to say whether it was called for. We are asked only this and this alone: we are asked to believe and to obey. Belief is not a necessary human response. Obedience is certainly not automatic. But we were chosen before the foundation of the world to believe and to obey. That’s who we are. It would be a shame for us to oppose our pre-destiny by falling into unbelief and disobedience. It would be a crying and damnable shame for us to believe instead the lie that Jesus Christ has not broken down the wall or for us to obey the evil one by continuing to honor the dividing wall of hostility. I proclaim to you this good news, that Christ has broken down the wall, and I urge us all to believe and obey.

I think you know what I am talking about. We usually preach salvation in terms of reconciliation to God. That’s pretty comfortable as long as we keep God at a good distance. But the letter to the Ephesians is clear that reconciliation to God comes in a package deal with reconciliation to each other. You cannot have one without the other! And we, the Presbytery of Charlotte, desperately need reconciliation across many boundaries: rich and poor, small and large, male and female, city and country, and especially those obvious racial, ethnic, and sometimes linguistic boundaries of whether our origins are in the Americas, Europe, Africa, or Asia.

The language in Ephesians is clear: “Christ...is our peace, who has made us both one,...abolishing in his flesh the law...that he might create in himself one new man in place of the two,...and might reconcile us both to God in one body....So then you are no longer strangers and sojourners.” I submit to you that this is the only foundation upon which we can build. None other will be adequate. This alone will be sufficient.

Now what, you may be asking, has Ephesians to do with us? Ephesians is about Jews and Gentiles, not us! It’s a fair question, if it seeks an answer. I’m glad that the Gentiles were brought in. That’s where most and perhaps all of us were brought in. This reconciliation simply cannot be accounted for on human terms. The Jews dispersed throughout the empire were despised, and they despised others. Ancient hostilities of religion, race, war, ethnicity, language, and blood kept them separated from the Gentiles, all the other nations. And yet, through the sacrifice of Jesus Christ, Jews and Gentiles came together to worship and sing the praise of the one Lord, one Savior, one God and Father of us all.

And according to this letter, this stands close to the heart of the gospel, not out at the edges. This is not an extra, or bonus, but is what the work of Christ is all about. The significance of this is that the reconciling work of Christ extends to other human divisions, even our own.

We are not the first in the church to have dealt with this. It does not appear likely that we shall be the last. Let it not be said of us, however, that we presumed that our hostilities were too great for the Lord to overcome, that we presumed our problems were too great for God to solve, or that we presumed our situation so unique as to be beyond the reach of the gospel.

In fact, I am convinced that we are, in the providence of God, in a special time in history so we can and need to hear more clearly than ever before precisely this gospel from Ephesians: Christ has broken down the dividing wall of hostility.

For centuries in the life of the early church, death was the overriding problem of human existence. The gospel was, accordingly, framed and articulated in terms of the resurrection of Jesus Christ being the promise of our own.

During the medieval church and into the Protestant Reformation, there was a shift of attention toward the problem of sin: how can a sinner stand before the righteous God? The gospel was, accordingly, framed and articulated in terms of the forgiveness of sin, salvation by grace through faith.

In our own century the problem of human existence has been voiced in terms of the sheer meaninglessness of human life, so the gospel has been announced in terms of meaning, purpose, direction, and hope.²

None of these are exclusive, of course. They build upon one another. They continue to be important and valid formulations of the gospel. And yet, the problem of death, though still universal, does not seem to be so pressing as when the average life span was under twenty-five years. The problems of sin and guilt are not very pressing in an age when it's difficult to find a conscience at all. And the people I know are not burdened by a lack of meaning in their lives but harried by a multiplicity of demands calling them in different directions and assigning them different, conflicting meanings to their lives. Faith assigns one meaning, family calls for another, work imposes a third, while race and economics and community and society and nation pile on to add others.

I submit to you that the overriding problem of human existence today is fragmentation. We are being torn in a thousand pieces—individually, as families, as churches, as society, and even as the Presbytery of Charlotte. That's why we need to hear again this formulation of the gospel for today: "Christ...is our peace, who has made us both one, and has broken down the dividing wall of hostility." Jesus Christ is the only one who can overcome the fragmentation of our lives, the disintegration of community, and re-integrate us into the unity of his one body.

So how do we apply the gospel to Charlotte Presbytery? As I have already urged us all, we are to believe and obey. But no sooner have I said this than many voices cry out that I am naive and an idealist, living in a fantasy world, pointing to things that are not real.

That accusation could be a serious affront to the gospel, but let's hear what these voices are saying. The point of the protest is that the dividing wall of hostility is high, and wide, and long, and deep, and hard, and ancient, and impenetrable.

That's all true, of course. If it were not, Christ would not have had to have died on the cross to break the wall down. To deny the reality of the dividing wall of hostility is to belittle the work of Christ and, indeed, to make God a liar. To say that we are forgiven is to say that we are sinners; to say that we are saved is to say that we were lost; to say that we are redeemed is to say that we were enslaved.

And yet, while we are painfully aware of, and believe in, the continuing reality of sin, we believe even more in the greater reality of forgiveness.³ That is to say again, in the past tense, Christ has broken down the wall. We can believe it or we can deny it. But we can't change what's already been done, and we shouldn't look to the future for something that's in the past. Our choice is to honor the wall or to honor the gospel, but we cannot do both! That is impossible. So, which will it be?

In the short time since I have returned to North Carolina, we have seen the Berlin Wall come down. We have seen the Soviet Union collapse. And yet, we still have not seen the prophetic dream of our brother, The Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr., realized in our society, our community, or even our Presbytery. It was thirty years ago, in Washington D.C., that he shared his dream with us. Listen again to these words:

I have a dream that my four little children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the color of their skin but by the content of their character.

I have a dream today.

I have a dream that one day the state of Alabama, whose governor's lips are presently dripping with the words of interposition and nullification, will be transformed

into a situation where little black boys and black girls will be able to join hands with little white boys and white girls and walk together as sisters and brothers.

I have a dream today.

I have a dream that one day every valley shall be exalted, every hill and mountain shall be made low, the rough places will be made a plain, and the crooked places will be made straight, and the glory of the Lord shall be revealed, and all flesh shall see it together.

This is our hope. This is the faith with which I return to the South. With this faith we will be able to hew out of the mountain of despair a stone of hope. With this faith we will be able to transform the jangling discords of our nation into a beautiful symphony of brotherhood. With this faith we will be able to work together, to pray together, to struggle together, to go to jail together, to stand up for freedom together, knowing that we will be free one day.

This will be the day when all of God's children will be able to sing with new meaning "My country 'tis of thee, sweet land of liberty, of thee I sing. Land where my fathers died, land of the pilgrims' pride, from every mountainside, let freedom ring."

And if America is to be a great nation this must become true. So let freedom ring from the prodigious hilltops of New Hampshire! let freedom ring from the mighty mountains of New York! Let freedom ring from the heightening Alleghenies of Pennsylvania!

Let freedom ring from the snowcapped Rockies of Colorado!

Let freedom ring from the curvaceous peaks of California!

But not only that; let freedom ring from Stone Mountain in Georgia!

Let freedom ring from every hill and mole hill of Mississippi. From every mountainside, let freedom ring.

When we let freedom ring, when we let it ring from every village and every hamlet, from every state and every city, we will be able to speed up that day when all of God's children, black men and white men, Jews and Gentiles, Protestants and Catholics, will be able to join hands and sing in the words of that old Negro spiritual, "Free at last! Free at last! Thank God almighty, we are free at last!"⁴

It is time to honor the dream, and to dishonor the wall. The Reverend Carroll D. Jenkins, first African-American executive of our Synod of the Mid-Atlantic, encouraged us in his sermon at a previous meeting of this Presbytery to let go of Pharaoh.⁵ It's time to let go of the wall.

We can believe in and cling to the dividing wall of hostility between us, or we can believe in and cling to the cross of Jesus Christ, but we can't do both. Which will it be?

There are many differences among us, and there always will be. At least some of them have to do with the beauty of the diversity of God's good creation. We rejoice in and give thanks for these. But those stubborn differences and divisions which deny and contradict the gospel are to be eradicated.

It was centuries ago that Augustine, that wonderful African pastor and bishop, the greatest theologian with whom God has yet graced the church, dealt in his massive work, *The City of God*, with the issue of openness to diversity limited only at the point that it might contradict the gospel. We would do well to listen to and learn from him again:

While this Heavenly City, therefore, is on pilgrimage in this world, she calls out citizens from all nations and so collects a society of aliens, speaking all languages. She takes no account of any difference in customs, laws, and institutions, by which earthly peace is achieved and preserved—not that she annuls or abolishes any of those, rather, she maintains them and follows them (for whatever divergences there are among the diverse nations, those institutions have one single aim—earthly peace), provided that no hindrance is presented thereby to the religion which teaches that the one supreme and true God is to be worshipped. Thus even the Heavenly City in her pilgrimage here on earth makes use of the earthly peace and defends and seeks the compromise between human wills in respect

of the provisions relevant to the mortal nature of man, so far as may be permitted without detriment to true religion and piety.⁶

The openness to compromise with political realities is important; the refusal to betray the gospel is even more important. Augustine understood how radically and fundamentally different the church is from the world.

Let's be very clear and to the point. It is a part of the irony of human existence that some of our best intentions lead to actions which have results that run exactly opposite of our intentions.⁷

Thus, some of the things we do to resist racism and sexism end up embodying and institutionalizing racism and sexism. We run the very grave danger that anything we do to acknowledge the difference between us will spill over into acknowledging and honoring and exacerbating and perpetuating the dividing wall of hostility between us, and then we will be found to have been opposing the gospel.

It occurs to me that we are not called upon to overcome the wall. We are called upon to believe and to obey the good news that Christ has already broken it down. It is incumbent upon us, so far as it lies within our power, to structure the life of this Presbytery in ways that are in accord with the gospel of Jesus Christ and not in ways that are antithetical to it.

In this regard, it is significant that Ephesians says that Christ "has broken down the dividing wall of hostility, abolishing in his flesh the law of commandments and ordinances, that he might create in himself one new man in place of the two, so making peace." Christ abolished the law; yet we continually write new ones to separate and bind ourselves, as if our rules and regulations could save us! They will not! They cannot! We run the risk of idolatry with them and as we use them to reconstruct the dividing wall of hostility, we do so to our own damnation.

I understand that the constraints of rules are easier than the terrible responsibility of freedom. But we who worship the Christ of the cross ought to know better than to try to take the easy way out. We have labored too long under the failing premise of trying to do things the nice and easy way. It's time for the Presbytery of Charlotte to do it nice and right!⁸

In conclusion, I proclaim again this gospel: "Christ Jesus...has broken down the dividing wall of hostility." That which we could not do for ourselves, Christ has done for us. We are called upon to believe and obey. If we do not believe this, we might as well pack up and go home right now, and quit pretending to be the church of Jesus Christ. But if we do believe it—and that is my fervent hope and prayer—if we do believe the gospel and obey Christ and honor the victory he has won for us, it is incumbent upon us to begin living and embodying and acting upon this gospel. Let's get on with being the church of Jesus Christ!

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1. Ephesians 2:13a, 14b. See Isaiah 55:10-11: "For as the rain and the snow come down from heaven, and do not return thither but water the earth, making it bring forth and sprout, giving seed to the sower and bread to the eater, so shall my word be that goes forth from my mouth; it shall not return to me empty, but it shall accomplish that which I purpose, and prosper in the thing for which I sent it." See *The Constitution of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)*, two parts (Louisville, Kentucky: The Office of the General Assembly, Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), 1993), Part II: *Book of Order*, G-3.0200b: "The new reality revealed in Jesus Christ is the new humanity, a new creation, a new beginning for human life in the world: (1) Sin is forgiven. (2) Reconciliation is accomplished. (3) The dividing walls of hostility are torn down."

2. Paul Tillich, *A History of Christian Thought: From Its Judaic and Hellenistic Origins to Existentialism*, ed. Carl E. Braaten (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1967, 1968), pp. 539-41.

3. See Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, eds. G. W. Bromiley and T. F. Torrance, trans. G. W. Bromiley et al., four vols. (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1957), vol. II: *The Doctrine of God*, second half volume, pp. 167, 490, and especially 742-63.

4. Martin Luther King, Jr., "I Have A Dream," in Lerone Bennett, Jr., *What Manner of Man: A Biography of Martin Luther King, Jr.*, with an introduction by Benjamin E. Mays (Chicago: Johnson Publishing Company, Inc., 1968), p. 162.

5. The Reverend Carroll D. Jenkins, Executive of the Synod of the Mid-Atlantic, in a sermon to Charlotte Presbytery on May 18, 1993, at Myers Park Presbyterian Church, Charlotte, North Carolina.

6. Augustine, *The City of God*, trans. Henry Bettenson, with an introduction by David Knowles (Middlesex, England: Penguin Books Ltd., 1972), Book XIX, chapter 17, p. 878.

7. See Reinhold Niebuhr, *The Irony of American History* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1952), especially pp. vii-ix, 151-74.

8. My apologies to Tina Turner, who, in a live performance of "Proud Mary," says: "Every now and then we kind of like to do things nice and easy. But somehow, you see, we never ever seem to do nothing completely nice and easy. You know why? Because we like to do it nice and rough. We're going to take the beginning of this song and do it easy, and then we're going to do the finish rough."