

Believers are Made One

13 But now in Christ Jesus, you who were far away have been brought near by the blood of Christ. 14 For he is our peace, who made both groups one and tore down the dividing wall of hostility. In his flesh, 15 he made of no effect the law consisting of commands and expressed in regulations, so that he might create in himself one new man from the two, resulting in peace. 16 He did this so that he might reconcile both to God in one body through the cross by which he put the hostility to death. 17 He came and proclaimed the good news of peace to you who were far away and peace to those who were near. 18 For through him we both have access in one Spirit to the Father. 19 So, then, you are no longer foreigners and strangers, but fellow citizens with the saints, and members of God's household, 20 built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the cornerstone. 21 In him the whole building, being put together, grows into a holy temple in the Lord. 22 In him you are also being built together for God's dwelling in the Spirit.

How many of you have backyard fences? Why? Probably to keep the neighbor's dog from pooping in your yard and from keeping your kids from wandering away. God had that for his Church in the Old Testament. It wasn't a chain link or cedar fence; it was the Old Testament laws and regulations. When we think of the "law" we think of the Ten Commandments, and they were part of it. But God also established other laws and regulations, what they could eat and not eat like pork, when to worship and how among others.

Such "laws" did point to Christ directly or indirectly. Imagine observing all those lamb sacrifices and then hearing John the Baptist point to Jesus as the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. Imagine resting on the Sabbath and using the time to read and talk about God's Word, and then hear Jesus invite you to come to him and find rest for your souls. But these laws were that backyard fence, separating God's people from all their pagan neighbors and religions. It was to protect them from outside influences. Thus God forbade marriages with Gentiles. Gentiles couldn't enter the temple. You couldn't even go into the home of a Gentile.

One special law was circumcision, that surgery they perform on the boys' "you know what." God started it with Abraham as a sign of the promise or covenant he made with him that he would be the Father of many nations, people would be blessed because of him and the Messiah would eventually be one of his descendants.

When Christ came, he played in that backyard with this fence. He lived under those Old Testament laws. He was circumcised. He avoided pork. He observed the Sabbath Day. He did it all. But he also said something very special. He said he did not come to abolish the law, but to fulfill it. When he does, that fence can be taken down. That is what he said to the Samaritan woman at the well. He acknowledged that the Samaritans worshipped in one place while the Jews worshipped in Jerusalem, but he said a day would come when people would worship him not in a particular place, but in faith and in truth. God told Paul who tells us in Colosse that we are no longer bound by these "laws." We don't have to close up everything on Saturdays anymore. We can eat pork. We don't have to be circumcised. God even graphically made this point to Peter who, in a vision, saw God open up a sheet with all sorts of unclean animals, and he said, "Now, eat." Christ has come. Those "laws" served their purpose. They protected God's people from outside influence. They pointed to Christ. Now that he has come, we are no longer under them.

Good. But it took the church a while to understand this. Let me share with you the verses before our text: ***"11 So, then, remember that at one time you were Gentiles in the flesh—called "the uncircumcised" by those called "the circumcised," which is done in the flesh by human hands. 12 At that time you were without Christ, excluded from the citizenship of Israel, and foreigners to the covenants of promise, without hope and without God in the world."*** Did you catch the nicknames? Gentile believers were called "uncircumcised" while Jewish believers were called "the circumcised." This was not a term of endearment. It was derogatory. This reminds me of how, at one time, the Germans in my hometown looked down on the Germans on the other side of river and called them "krauts." Yes, krauts calling krauts "krauts." The same here.

Read through Paul's letter to the Galatians. There was a group called the Circumcision Group because they were Christians who insisted that Gentile believers must live under the Old Testament laws. So they demanded circumcision and other Old Testament Laws. Can you imagine going to a church like that? I can imagine half sitting on one side and the other half sitting on the other. Or maybe they had two services, one for the uncircumcised and one for the circumcised. We see it in the book of Romans. The circumcised, the Jews who believed in Christ, looked down on the Gentile believers as upstarts and so new to God that they didn't know anything. The Gentiles looked down on the Jewish believers as the frozen chosen who had been in the church so long they were merely going through the motions. This is why Paul calls this a ***"dividing wall of hostility."***

Do such walls exist today? Yes. They may not involve circumcision or Old Testament laws anymore, but there are differences. If you and I flew to Africa and worshipped at one of our sister churches over there, we would feel awkward. I heard that each member dances to the altar and drops his offering off there. Would you do it? And at the potluck, they may actually serve you locusts. In China they may serve you chicken feet and we may nibble at it and pretend to smile, but in our hearts we would be saying, "Really?" Likewise, they might take a spoon full of tater tot sauerkraut cream of mushroom hotdish and pretend to like it. You will find recent converts who are excited and third generation believers who are use to a certain of doing things.

How do you remove these dividing walls? How can you unite believers who have different backgrounds, skin color, cultures and habits? There is something that unites all believers whether they serve locusts or sauerkraut, whether they use a guitar or organ for music, no matter what skin color or habits they have. It is Christ.

"¹³ But now in Christ Jesus, you who were far away have been brought near by the blood of Christ. ¹⁴ For he is our peace, who made both groups one and tore down the dividing wall of hostility. In his flesh, ¹⁵ he made of no effect the law consisting of commands and expressed in regulations, so that he might create in himself one new man from the two, resulting in peace. ¹⁶ He did this so that he might reconcile both to God in one body through the cross by which he put the hostility to death. ¹⁷ He came and proclaimed the good news of peace to you who were far away and peace to those who were near." Imagine the relief these words had on the Gentile members in that church. It doesn't matter if they were circumcised or not. Once they were pagans who were far off, but now they are near and part of God's Church. Jesus removed those Old Testament laws which became a wall of hostility between the two factions. Jesus did this, but not by abolishing or erasing those laws. He did it by obeying them perfectly. He was circumcised on the 8th day. He observed the sabbath. He did this by coming "***in the flesh***," as a human. His humanity made Jesus live under those laws. Imagine the relief the Jewish believers had. They no longer have to look over their shoulders all the time wondering if they broke some law or not. They are saved by Christ's perfection and not condemned for their imperfection.

But he also "***in the flesh***" obeyed the moral law. He obeyed his parents perfectly. He respected even the pagan government of Rome as God's representatives when he said to pay your taxes. He came to reconcile mankind, Jews and Gentiles, to God. God says a holy heaven can have only holy people living in it, and when he looks on us he doesn't see anyone who should be in his heaven. In fact, he sees people ripe for judgment and deserving only hell itself.

But Jesus reconciles us to God. The sin that keeps us out of heaven he paid for with his own death on the cross. "***He did this so that he might reconcile both to God in one body through the cross by which he put the hostility to death.***" The hostility here is all the sin and hurt we committed against God. Jesus removes it by paying for our sins. And the perfect life, that holiness that would make us fit right in with God in heaven, he lived it and now simply gives it to us. We are at peace with God by Jesus and the cross.

And the result is we are one with each other. It says, "***in one body.***" We are no longer two or more different people. We are one person, one body with Christ as the head. Talk about equalizing things. It doesn't matter if you are a slave or free, male or female, Jew or Gentile; it doesn't matter what skin color you have or what type of food you prefer or whether you want guitar or organ for the hymns.

You know what this means? I have family members with whom I am not in fellowship externally. They belong to this church and I belong to that church. Because of differences in doctrine, there are walls. I should not join them in Communion, for example. But God just gave me a big sigh of relief because of something known as the Invisible Church. Anywhere at anytime no matter which church you belong to, when God's Word is opened up and people hear and believe and cling to Christ as their Savior, they are one with all other believers everywhere else.

That is because we are united, not by external things like the church you belong to or skin color or what hymnal you use, but we are united by Christ and God's Word. "***¹⁹ So, then, you are no longer foreigners and strangers, but fellow citizens with the saints, and members of God's household, ²⁰ built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the cornerstone. ²¹ In him the whole building, being put together, grows into a holy temple in the Lord. ²² In him you are also being built together for God's dwelling in the Spirit.***" There is only one holy Christian Church, one Communion of saints, one body of Christ. Yes, there are external divisions among churches on earth. There have to be because some folks don't want to agree with everything the Bible says. But Christ and the cross and God's Word unites us even if we are divided now. They believe because they are built on the foundation of God's Word with Christ as the key component for life and salvation. Man may try to hurt or disrupt this unity as we see on earth, but God unites all by faith in Christ as one body.

What a comfort we have in this text. Amen.