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LIVE the Story

The Broken Wall

Many years ago, my friend Steven traveled to Berlin, Germany, on a mission to secure a piece of the Berlin Wall. That wall, emblematic of one of the most menacing divisions in the world in the twentieth century, had recently fallen. [p 86](#) People from around the world went to help tear it down and to collect a piece of history.

After he arrived in Berlin, Steven searched for a portion of the wall from which to retrieve a chunk. The most familiar sections of the wall had already been torn down, so he headed to a residential neighborhood where the wall was accessible. Seeing an exposed portion of the wall, Steven took out his tools and began to chip away at the concrete. Promptly, a resident of the neighborhood emerged from his home and yelled angrily, “Dat is not de vall! Dat is an apartment haus.” Embarrassed, Steven stopped damaging this innocent building and went to find the actual wall.

Why would my friend and so many others like him go to such trouble to chip away at a wall? Some folks may have wanted an unusual souvenir. But Steven and thousands of others wanted more than a hunk of history: they sought a personal connection to one of the most compelling stories of our time.

East Germany began the Berlin Wall in 1961 as a wire fence dividing the city into east and west. It separated people from their jobs and families. Later, the original fence was replaced by a twelve-foot high concrete barrier. This wall not only split Berlin but also represented the fearsome division between the Eastern Bloc countries with their repressive socialism and the democratic West. For decades the Berlin Wall symbolized the hostility between East and West that threatened nuclear annihilation. It was an emblem of oppression and fear.

On November 9, 1989, as an international movement was ending the division of Europe, the East German government decided to allow its

citizens to pass freely through the Berlin Wall, effectively initiating its fall. That was a moment of great celebration both in Germany and throughout the world. Berliners instantly began demolishing sections of the wall, chiseling off small pieces. A year later, the East German army began to take down the wall officially. During this time, people from around the world made pilgrimages to Berlin in order to contribute to the demolition of the wall and to save pieces of it. In this way, they could celebrate the reunification of a nation and the hope for a more peaceful world. Moreover, they could participate in the story of the destruction of a real dividing wall of hostility.

According to Ephesians 2:11–22, we can participate in a similar story. Christ has broken down the wall of hostility between Jews and Gentiles. Thus if we are in Christ, we step into this story. We experience life without the dividing wall as we join the unified people of God.

Like the case of Berliners and their wall, we do not bring about the fall of the wall. The Berlin Wall was essentially destroyed when the East German government chose to open it. The wall dividing Jews from Gentiles was [p 87](#) essentially destroyed when Christ died on the cross. Yet like the Berliners with their hammers and chisels, we can participate in the story of the wall’s destruction and, in a practical way, even contribute to that destruction. We, along with all other believers, can live in the unity created in Christ as citizens in the one kingdom of God. Plus, we can live as blocks of stone in a new building, the unified temple of the living God composed of all who are in Christ.

Like those who once chipped away at the Berlin Wall, we care deeply about the demolishing of hostility between and the establishment of unity among once divided people. So does God, according to Ephesians 2:11–22. This passage reveals that God cares enough about unity for Christ to sacrifice his life on the cross so as to break down enmity between Jews and Gentiles, thus creating one new humanity. Christ’s peacemaking work is not incidental to the story of salvation; it is an essential element.

A Bigger Story of Reconciliation

Given the truth of Ephesians 2:11–22, one might expect that Christians today would put a premium on making peace between alienated people. The fact that they do not may be because Paul’s specific

topic addresses one particular social division, the enmity between Jews and Gentiles. For Paul and the early Christians, this division was as significant as the division between East and West in the late twentieth century. But for many of us, this particular disunity is not on center stage. We worry more about the divisions that trouble our lives today: alienation in families, strife in cities, discord between races, socioeconomic gaps, schisms in churches and denominations, and conflict between ethnic and religious groups. Thus we may wonder if Ephesians 2:11–22 has anything to say to us and our contemporary struggles. But if Christ’s death pushed aside the barrier that separated Jews and Gentiles, then by analogy we can conclude that God seeks to remove barriers and enmity wherever people are divided. The peacemaking and unifying work of God, illustrated in the reconciliation of Jews and Gentiles, touches all of life.

Yet analogy alone may not be enough to stimulate God’s people to live the story of broken walls and unified humanity. We need a stronger theological rationale if we are going to see the second half of Ephesians 2 as equally important as the first half. We need a bigger story if we are going to be convinced that Ephesians 2 is as relevant to our lives today as it was in the first century. We need the biblical story of God.

That God’s story is bigger than reconciliation between Jews and Gentiles is suggested by several elements of 2:11–22. If *all* Christians have been brought near through Christ, should not *all* hostilities among us be destroyed as well (2:13)? If Christ is indeed “our peace” (2:14), would not **p 88** his peacemaking work touch all places of enmity in the world? If Christ’s purpose is to create one new humanity, wouldn’t this include all peoples delivered from all divisions (2:15)?

The larger story of God in Ephesians answers these questions in the affirmative. God’s grand plan is “to bring unity to all things in heaven and on earth under Christ” (1:10). The unifying of Jews and Gentiles is a central aspect of this cosmic unity. It reveals in one, crucial setting what unity looks like and how it occurs. But if God is unifying *all things*, then surely he seeks to end *all divisions* among people.

A passage in Colossians strengthens this conviction: “[You] have put on the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge in the image of its Creator. Here there is no Gentile or Jew, circumcised or uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian,

slave or free, but Christ is all, and is in all” (Col 3:10–11). In Christ the disunity between Gentile and Jew is abolished, but so are other kinds of disunity, including ethnic (barbarian, Scythian) and economic divisions (slave, free).

The entire biblical story confirms that God through Christ is in the global reconciliation business. In Genesis, human beings at first experienced unfettered intimacy with each other (Gen 2:25). Yet when they sinned, the initial result was the shattering this intimacy as the man and woman hid from each other (Gen 3:7). Thus began the saga of separation between human beings, which is epitomized in the enmity between Jews and Gentiles. Jesus, through his death on the cross, not only takes away the law as a barrier between Jews and Gentiles but also addresses the deeper problem of human sin, the source of all human dissension. Thus the cross brings reconciliation not only between Jews and Gentiles but also between all peoples who experience division and enmity rooted in sin. Just as sin against God led to brokenness in relationship among people, so reconciliation to God leads to reconciliation among people. This vision of unity among all peoples is highlighted at the end of the biblical story. In Revelation 21:24–26, all nations (again, *ethnē*) walk in the light of God, and the inclusive people of God share together in the peace of the age to come. Social divisions and injustice disappear when God unifies all things in Christ (Eph 1:10).

Ephesians 2:11–22 is not a distraction from the reconciliation that we, as individuals, have with God through Christ. Rather, this passage enlarges our vision of God’s work. It shows that reconciliation between divided peoples, far from being a minor tangent in God’s story, is a glorious and major theme. If we are going to live fully in the grace of God in Christ and participate in his cosmic work, then we must live out the story of reconciliation both as reconciled people and as agents of reconciliation. Even as Christ, our peace, made peace through the cross, so we are to be peacemakers in every dimension of **p 89** life: in our relationships and families, in our neighborhoods and workplaces, in our churches and denominations, and in our cities and nations.

Living the Story of Reconciliation

We have a great need for the peace of Christ in our world today. All around us we see strife and

division, conflict and injustice. Digital social media has increased our awareness of the disunity of human society, even as it has spawned greater meanness and intolerance that exacerbate this disunity. Racial tensions in our society are growing, spurred by economic disparities and alarming stories of cultural bias. Ethnic hatred breeds oppression and terrorism across the world.

Given the widespread divisions in our world, we can feel overwhelmed. We may ask: How can I hope to bring reconciliation to this world? We need to remember the truth of Ephesians 2. The multiple wounds of the world will only be mended by God's grace. We cannot begin to make a lasting difference except inasmuch as we are in Christ. Moreover, because we are in Christ, we are no longer one person trying to make a difference. Rather, we are now part of God's kingdom, God's family, God's temple. God, through the Spirit at work in the community of his people, will extend the peace of Christ into the world.

Often God begins with us, helping us see the walls that we erect or to which we contribute. These walls might be obvious ones, like racial prejudice, ethnic hatred, greed, or unbridled nationalism. Yet the walls that keep us from experiencing reconciliation may be more hidden, such as physical and relational distance from people who are different from us, habits of self-centeredness, traditions that foster separatism, or just plain ignorance that breeds insensitivity.

I can illustrate that last point, although the story is embarrassing. I grew up in a community that was more than 95 percent Anglo. I was not raised with obvious racism, but I never really thought about how my behavior might build walls between me and others. In college, my blindness to my own bias began to be revealed as I got to know people from different races, ethnicities, and life experiences.

Once I was hanging out with one of the leaders of my InterVarsity chapter. Jeanette and I were talking about the crazy things I had done while in high school when I mentioned something about a "Chinese fire drill." Jeanette—a Chinese-American—bristled just a bit when I used that phrase. In a kind but firm voice, she said, "Mark, many of us who are Chinese don't really appreciate that expression. It makes fun of us, and it can be hurtful." I felt immediately ashamed. Of course what I said was insensitive. The fact that I had said it to a Chinese person whom I greatly admired

revealed the extent [p 90](#) of my ignorance. I quickly apologized, and Jeanette quickly forgave me. But the memory of what I had done stayed with me. I wondered how many more things in my life were inherently racist. Since that time, I have found quite a few. No doubt there still are more to be identified, confessed, and discarded.

My former InterVarsity leader Jeanette is now a pastor on the staff of a church that is committed to living the biblical story of reconciliation. When in 1980 I visited Grace Chapel in Lexington, Massachusetts, it was as Caucasian as the population of the town it served. But over the years Lexington became more ethnically diverse. Grace Chapel saw its mission as extending throughout the Boston area, a region that was becoming thoroughly multicultural. In the 1990s visionary members of this church, inspired by the biblical story of God's unified people, began a ministry for members from a variety of cultural backgrounds. The church began to offer English classes for those who spoke other languages and to sponsor a Cultural Awareness Weekend. Worship services were translated into Korean, Spanish, and Mandarin. Later, in 2005 church leaders began to ask themselves, "How should Grace Chapel respond to the changing demographics in our church and the region in a biblical way?" This led to the formation of a Multicultural Leadership/Learning Team to expand the perspectives of the church. Since then, the church has intentionally sought to bring cultural diversity to its leadership. It hired a pastor to oversee its multicultural ministries. In fact, Grace Chapel called my friend Jeanette, the first American-born Asian American member of the staff, as Pastor of Global and Regional Outreach. Today, 30 percent of the membership of Grace Chapel comes from cultures other than Euro-American. The church also partners with non-Anglo churches in the Boston area and throughout the world.

This is just one story of one church that is seeking to live the story of reconciliation through Christ. I tell this story partly because I know it and partly because it can serve as a model for other churches. Grace Chapel did not begin with big declarations or big programs. Rather, it began its growth in multicultural ministry through relationships, including plenty of listening. Dana Baker, the pastor of Multicultural Ministries at Grace Chapel, wrote about the importance of listening in the book *Ethnic Blends: Mixing Diversity*

into Your Local Church: “As we transitioned from being an almost entirely monocultural church of people of western European descent, fifteen years ago, to a congregation now approaching 30 percent non-Anglo ethnicity, we have learned how important it is to listen to the voices of the people whom God has brought to our church and not, as leaders from the majority culture, try to figure it out for ourselves.”¹⁸

p 91 In 1968, while preaching at the National Cathedral in Washington, D. C., Martin Luther King, Jr., famously said, “We must face the sad fact that at eleven o’clock on Sunday morning when we stand to sing ‘In Christ there is no East or West,’ we stand in the most segregated hour of America.”¹⁹ This still may be true today, but with the model of churches like Grace Chapel, things are changing. A recent column in the *Huffington Post* bore the title, “Racial Diversity Increasing in U.S. Congregations.” Sociologist Scott Thumma sums up recent research that finds among U.S. churches “a major shift toward desegregation.” According to Thumma, the percentage of multiracial congregations “had nearly doubled in the past decade to 13.7%.”²⁰

The Challenge and Reward of Living as People Reconciled in Christ

When I last checked, 13.7 percent is not an “A” grade, though it’s better than the 7.5 percent that was the score from 1998. If we are going to live the story of reconciliation through Christ, we must acknowledge that we have a long way to go. We will make progress not merely through our good intentions and hard work but mainly as we live out who we are in Christ. Christ can do in and through us what nothing or nobody else can do.

A couple of years after my gaffe with Jeanette, I found myself in the most uncomfortable cross-cultural experience of my young life. I was leading a team of Anglo-American Christians from

Harvard who spent a weekend with members from Deliverance Tabernacle, an African-American Pentecostal church in Bridgeport, Connecticut. We slept on their sofas, ate at their tables, and worshiped with them on Sunday morning. That service, which lasted three hours, was the longest worship service of my life. (The pastor told me afterwards that they had shortened it up a bit “for you white kids.”) But it wasn’t just the length of the service that stretched me. I was used to a well-ordered Presbyterian form of worship, with some forays into charismatic praise. The service at Deliverance Tabernacle included more than a few praise songs, however. The singing seemed to be endless. Plus the service featured clapping, dancing, several enthusiastic testimonies, speaking in tongues, crying, shouting, and skipping around the sanctuary. (You really don’t want to see me skip in a worship service.)

But the most awkward moment of all came in the middle of the pastor’s lengthy sermon, which had been continuously interrupted by cries from the p 92 congregation (“Yes, Lord,” “Amen,” and “Preach it, pastor”) and accompanied by regular drum and organ music. For some reason, the pastor felt inspired to call me up: “Mark, you’re the leader of this group from Harvard. Why don’t you bring the Word to us.” He pointed to the pulpit, and I trudged forward reluctantly.

I tried to be energetic. I tried to be enthusiastic. But mostly I felt like the most lifeless white guy who ever lived. After a while, the congregation had pity on me. Instead of shouting, “Amen,” they called out things like, “Help him, Lord.” Finally, after ten minutes of humiliating misery, the Lord did help me—back to my seat, that is.

Once more I felt keenly aware of my narrow life experience. I felt embarrassed by who I was and how poorly I had brought the gospel to these people. I wished I could just disappear. Yet after the service, the members of Deliverance Tabernacle were gracious and encouraging. I felt loved in spite of my stilted Anglo ways. As church

¹⁸ Mark DeYmaz and Harry Li, *Ethnic Blends: Mixing Diversity into Your Local Church* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2010), 155.

¹⁹ Martin Luther King, Jr., “Remaining Awake through a Great Revolution,” March 31, 1968, <http://mlk-kpp01.stanford.edu/index.php/encyclopedia/document>

tsentry/doc_remaining_aware_through_a_great_revolution/.

²⁰ Scott Thumma, “Racial Diversity Increasing in U.S. Congregations,” *Huffington Post*, March 24, 2013, http://www.huffingtonpost.com/scott-thumma-phd/racial-diversity-increasing-in-us-congregations_b_2944470.html.

members embraced me warmly, I sensed that we were, indeed, one in Christ. Though there were still many cultural walls between us, in Christ we were fellow citizens, members of the same family, and building blocks in the amazingly diverse temple of the Lord. I experienced for the first time in my life the joy of being one new humanity with people I would never even have met outside of Christ.