

Wrecking crew: Ephesians 2:11-22

by [G. Kevin Baker](#) in the [July 11, 2006](#) issue

The world is full of walls. Everywhere we go, there are fences, gates, partitions and other ingeniously constructed barriers—all aimed at keeping something or someone in and keeping something or someone else out. We need walls: walls in our homes to protect us against wind and rain; walls to keep livestock safely in and predators out; walls to help us separate spaces and improve organization and efficiency. But one does not have to be a sage to comprehend how walls, both literal and spiritual, can lead to grief, division and even violence. All walls serve a purpose, but not all walls serve the purposes of God.

In Ephesians we read that Christ has “broken down the dividing wall, that is, the hostility between us.” It’s difficult to understand how this can happen, especially today, when hostility appears to be the bread and butter of human relating and living. But we know that we have helped to build walls of hostility. We’ve built many of them not out of bricks and mortar, but out of the raw material of sin and division. Then we’ve cemented them with the mortar of name-calling, labeling and prejudice.

An ill-conceived application of the Torah helped ensure that a wall of hostility was solidly in place among those in the growing Christian community. In this case, it was the circumcision insiders pitted against the uncircumcision outsiders. Perspective and power shift depending on what side of the wall a person is standing on. Just ask those called “U.S. citizens by birth” about “noncitizens” in their midst; ask the “legally naturalized immigrant” about the “illegal alien,” the Jewish Israeli “settler” about the gentile Palestinian “squatter” or the white-suburban commuter about the people who live around his downtown church. Again, all walls serve a purpose, but not all walls serve the purposes of God.

What about the walls between Christian communions? What about the voluntary segregation of typical Lord’s Day worship services? What about the scandal of divisions, splits and infighting that flies in the face of Jesus’ high priestly prayer for unity and oneness? (John 17). Such troubles in the body of Christ are a sign not of diversity but of division. They are a sin that compromises the church’s witness and grieves the Holy Spirit.

How then can one receive this word from Ephesians 2? The unity referred to here is not manufactured by human hands busy trying to pursue multiculturalism and tolerance in the world's image. The peace described here is not just a ceasing of conflict or the absence of violence. The hope alluded to is not merely a hankering after international experiences and cross-cultural encounters. Here unity, peace and hope are not things at all; they are a person. Christ is our peace; in his flesh he has made both groups into one and has broken down the dividing wall. In Christ's death on the cross, peace has been achieved and hostility has been crucified. Jesus is the singular, God-human wrecking crew that demolishes division and gifts us with unity, peace and reconciliation.

It is this gift and its givenness that creates a scandal. It is hard to receive a gift when your hands are not open. It is even harder when your hands are clutching bricks for personal building projects that have nothing to do with the in-breaking kingdom of God. My own experience in a multiracial and multicultural congregation serves to constantly remind me that unity and peace come from God alone. Any human attempt to build unity, no matter how valiant and well intended, will fall far short of the spiritual structure that has Jesus Christ as the chief cornerstone. Such human construction often poses as "kingdom building," but when the hard hats leave the site, all that one can see is a wall.

It is important to note that recognizing unity as a gift does not make receiving it a passive affair. Anyone with any experience in gift giving and receiving knows that receiving gifts can be hard, costly work. If it is an extravagant gift, one must put away pride and clothe oneself in humility; if it is an undeserved gift, one must put away closed-fisted objections rooted in dogged self-sufficiency. If it is a gift that says more about the nature of the giver than the fleeting desires of the receiver, one must be willing to let go of self-centeredness.

When God gives us a gift, it still must be received and appropriated as the Giver intended. Baptism is such a gift, especially when it is given to children who are unable to answer for themselves. In this act, God is busy demolishing sin, washing away debris and carefully placing a new, living stone into the holy temple of the Lord, a stone that no longer resembles the sin-riddled, dilapidated vessel that was presented. It is a gift that every baptized believer is given in this sacrament in which each stone is patiently shaped, fashioned, named and incorporated into the body of Christ. It is a gift that is freely given. It is also a gift that, although it can't be taken back, can be shunned, resisted, squandered and profaned.

Why are there so many walls remaining in the church? Perhaps we are so caught up in the busy work of building that we fail to step back and examine our resulting handiwork. Has all that blood and sweat, have all those tears, been poured into a failed construction project that has left us with one long wall rather than a “dwelling place for God”? Maybe it is time to put down our tools, agendas and misguided aspirations so that the original Site Manager can gift us with a building not made with human hands.