

The Temple of the Spirit

For Christians a church building is not a 'Temple' in the strict sense. It is the people themselves who are the 'place' where God is now deciding to live. ... The living God was now seeking to make his home in the hearts and lives, and particularly the communities, that had declared their loyalty to Jesus, and were determined to live by the gospel.

N.T. Wright, *Paul for Everyone: The Prison Letters*⁴

READ EPHESIANS 2:11-22

The Wall of Division

In the background of so many New Testament texts is the tension between Jew and Gentile Christians. The modern reader often fails to appreciate the depth and frustration evident in this strife. The Jewish Christians believed that all the ancient promises of God to Israel had found their satisfaction in Jesus of Nazareth, the Christ of God. At last, after generations of being tormented and oppressed by the Gentile kingdoms, God had proved faithful and delivered to them a Son of David who could offer them a new and living hope.

And yet, as the years passed and the message of Jesus the Messiah was declared in the world, the Gentiles also received the gospel message and wanted to accept the promises offered in Jesus. To convince a Jew like Peter to extend Christian baptism to the Gentiles required God to send Peter

a vision repeated three times in addition to an extravagant act of miraculous power (Acts 10). The resulting entrance of Gentiles into the family of God resulted in Christian history's first major crisis, and a Council was called in Jerusalem featuring all the notable figures of the early Christian faith (Acts 15). The conclusion, repeated in various letters using various expressions, was that Gentiles were indeed full participants in the promises of God by Abraham and the fellowship of Christians in Christ.

But that did not mean they liked each other.

No, to get these groups to get along daily, the letters of Paul use every rhetorical technique available to persuade Christians to view themselves through a new lens.

In Ephesians, the second chapter continues to talk about Gentiles and Jews trying to work together in the church. One thing that separated Jews from Gentiles was circumcision (v. 11). Circumcision was a medical procedure that had started with Abraham in the Old Testament. Jewish people considered it part of their identity as Abraham's children and as the people of God. It was hard for them to understand how Gentiles, who had not been circumcised, could now be God's people too.

Explaining this, Paul summarizes the state of the Gentile before Christ. In the past, the Gentiles were separated from God by many things, including their own sin and ignorance. However, even when the Gentile lived the best he could, he was still kept out of Israel by the laws of Moses that kept Israel separate from other people. The Gentiles were strangers from God's people (v. 12). Despite their many false gods and idols, Gentiles were "without God in the world". With this description, I suspect Paul is trying to generate just a little bit of sympathy from the Jewish Christian toward his

Gentile brother.

Now, Paul argues that those “far off” Gentiles could be near to God through Christ (v. 13). Jesus is our peace, whether we are Jew or Gentile (v. 14). His offer and promise is extended to all. This is not an insult to Jewish identity so much as it is an offer of a new identity to all humanity.

To help explain what Christ has done, Paul compares this new relationship to the Jewish temple in Jerusalem. The temple, like the Tabernacle of old, was divided into compartments and courts that allowed varying degrees of access to God. The center of the temple was the Most Holy Place, a place the High Priest alone was allowed to enter just once per year on the Day of Atonement. It was the closest any person since Moses was allowed to get to the presence of God. Just outside of the Most Holy Place was the Holy Place, a room that the priests were allowed to enter in the performance of their duties. Just outside the inner temple court stood the court reserved for Jewish men, and beyond that a court area open to all Jews, whether male or female.

Outside of all of these courts and rooms, you could find a section titled the Court of the Gentiles. The Gentile visitor to Jerusalem was allowed this far into the temple and no further. It was a place where the buying and selling of animals took place, which tells you a little about how the Jewish people felt about the Gentiles.

The inner boundary of the Court of the Gentiles was formed by a block wall. This “dividing wall” is what Paul references in speaking to the Ephesians (v. 14). In 1871, archaeologists found blocks from that wall, called the *soreg*, inscribed with the following warning written in Greek:

NO GENTILE MAY ENTER
BEYOND THE DIVIDING WALL

INTO THE COURT AROUND THE HOLY PLACE
WHOEVER IS CAUGHT
WILL HAVE HIMSELF
TO BLAME FOR HIS
SUBSEQUENT DEATH

The wall physically represented the separation between Jew and Gentile.

One Dwelling Place

What Paul tells us is that when Jesus died, that wall came crashing down. Paul is not talking about the literal wall, but the division that had kept Jews and Gentiles apart for so long. The Law of Moses, “the law of commandments expressed in ordinances,” would no longer separate Jew and Gentile, all because of what Jesus has done for us at the cross (v. 15-16). The good news about Jesus is for all, and no one is excluded from it.

Before, we were separated from God, but now we can come to the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit (v. 18). Think of it as if you were visiting a foreign country. When you travel there, you are allowed to visit, but you do not have all the same rights and benefits of a citizen. What Paul is saying is that now, instead of being tourists or illegal immigrants, we become “fellow citizens” with all other Christians (v. 19).

Another way of thinking about this new unity is to think of the church as a building, like the temple itself. A great building is built upon a strong foundation. The church has the teachings of all the apostles and prophets as our foundation (v. 20). The apostles and prophets are lined up around the “cornerstone” who is Christ (v. 20). A

cornerstone is a stone that is set first, and all others are measured off it. Jesus is that cornerstone for us. Every Christian, whether Jew or Gentile, is a block in that temple. Every Christian is built around Christ. It no longer matters where you come from or who your parents are. All that matters is that your life is built upon Jesus in his holy temple, the church.

Once we are all built together into God's church, we become a temple where God may dwell (v. 21-22). God lives in us and does his work all around us. As part of the church, we are blessed to be part of that holy temple, rather than being on the outside, looking in. We are "being built together into a dwelling place for God by the Spirit" (v. 22).

Who Are "We"?

So far in our study, we have stressed the question of personal identity: "Who am I?" This is the way that all modern, Western people have asked the question for centuries. "I am who I am," we believe.

More recently, postmodern philosophy has shifted the question away from individualism to collective identity. "I am who we are," they would say. The emphasis is that you are a part of a class of people who define you, whether that is your gender, social class, or other category. I think the attempt to make our entire identity as collective identity is a mistake, but I agree at least in part that our identity is more than just the idea of myself that I keep in my head.

Ancient people often thought of themselves as part of their group, but it did not make them more enlightened. In many cases, this kind of tribalism led to wars and violence as

one class of people was constantly being pitted against another. It is this kind of tribalism that Paul is specifically against in Ephesians 2. It created groups of people who were alienated from each other and from God.

The new Christian identity is shared among us, but it is not tribal. A tribe looks inward and serves itself. A temple looks upward and serves God.

New Testament scholar N.T. Wright instead of a physical temple, “it is the people themselves who are the ‘place’ where God is now deciding to live.” God makes his home in us to the degree that we define ourselves by our loyalty to Him and to each other in his church.

This selfless identity created in the imitation of our selfless Lord is a hostility killer (2:14). Jesus preached peace by removing our tribes. He takes away our selfishness and points us above to the glory of God.

Paul makes this same point to the squabbling Corinthian church. “Do you now know that you are God’s temple and that God’s Spirit dwells in you?” (1 Corinthians 3:16) The Greek pronoun “you” in that verse is plural, not singular. Paul is not suggesting that you by yourself are a walking, talking temple like Jesus was (John 2:19-21). No, Paul is claiming that we – a new people with a new identity in the service of God – become his temple, and the Spirit of God dwells among us.

Paul makes this point again in 1 Corinthians 6:19-20, and once again uses plural pronouns to emphasize the point. “Or do you not know that *your [plural] body [singular]* is a *temple [singular]* of the Holy Spirit within *you [plural]*, whom *you [plural]* have from God? *You [plural]* are not *your [plural]* own, for *you [plural]* were bought with a price. So glorify God in *your [plural] body [singular]*.” We are together part of one

body which is the temple of the Holy Spirit. We are built together for his glory. No stone glories in himself, and no wall divides into classes or tribes. When we are in his temple, we are God's and he dwells among us.

Who Am I?

I am no longer my own. I am defined as part of something larger than myself. I am not alone, and so I need not define myself alone. The most important things about me may not be what makes me different from others, but rather the faith I share with my brothers and sisters in Christ.

However, even as I accept my new shared identity, I also acknowledge that “we” are no longer a tribe. We are not merely a group of people who trade individual selfishness for group selfishness. Just as my highest goal is not in serving myself, our highest goal is not in serving ourselves.

We are a temple. As a temple, we delight in the presence, worship, and service of God. Whatever my individual role may be in this temple, it is part of a great work of God that brings him glory. Like a true temple, we hope that everyone who sees us forgets about us and sees only the God we serve.

“For a day in your courts is better than a thousand elsewhere. I would rather be a doorkeeper in the house of my God than dwell in the tents of wickedness” (Psalm 84:10).

Discussion Questions

1. The passage speaks of the barriers and divisions that existed between Jews and Gentiles before coming to Christ. How do these historical divisions parallel or relate to modern-day divisions or barriers within the Church or society? How can we, as a community, work to overcome such divisions?
2. Paul describes Christ as the cornerstone of the temple. What significance does this imagery have in understanding our collective identity as the Church? How does Christ serve as the unifying factor in our diverse community of believers?
3. Verse 22 mentions that believers are being built together into a dwelling place for God by the Spirit. How does the Holy Spirit play a role in shaping our collective identity as the temple of God? What does it mean practically for us to be a dwelling place for God's presence?
4. How does Ephesians 2:11-22 challenge our understanding of identity, unity, and purpose within the Church? What practical steps can we take as a community to more fully embrace our identity as the temple of God?