

Ephesians

An encyclical letter from the heart of CHRIST
through the heart of Paul to the heart of the Church of all time

by

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CHAPTER SIX

THE BREAKING DOWN OF THE MIDDLE WALL

WHAT VARYING ANSWERS we receive from this group and that when we ask for a classification of the human family! I ask the ethnologist how he would divide the human family, and he tells me that there are twelve species and thirty-seven races. I ask the economist how he divides the human family, and he says he divides it into producer and consumer, and they are often one and the same person. I ask the moralist, and he says he divides the race into good people and bad people. I ask the ritualist, and he says he classifies humanity into those who are inside the church and those who are without. I ask the evangelist, and he says his segregation is into those who are saved and those who are lost. I ask the Apostle Paul, and, while he may not quarrel with other classifications, he gives me a definition which is different from anyone of them. **"Give none offense,"** he says, **"neither to the Jews, nor to the Gentiles, nor to the church of God."**

As we said in the previous chapter, prior to the apostolic age the world, from a religious point of view, had been divided into two sections, two camps, and there had been an almost impassable barrier between them. The Jew had been on one side of this barrier and the Gentile on the other. And this intangible barrier of religious prestige on the one hand and of religious disadvantage on the other, had its visible and material counterpart in the structure of the Temple which had been erected during the lifetime of the Apostles.

Built upon Mount Moriah, of white marble, it is said to have had the appearance from a distance of a mountain of snow; and inasmuch as the construction was on ascending levels up the slope of the hill, the assertion that the length and the breadth and the height of it were equal may have validity. Historians are not in precise agreement as to the number of courts, but commencing from the upper level it has been said that there were twelve steps down from the Court of the Priests to the Court of the Sons of Israel; fifteen steps from the Court of the Sons of Israel to the Court of the Women; four steps from the Court of the Women to the wall overlooking the Court of the Gentiles; and then fifteen more steps from this wall to the level of the Court of the Gentiles.

This court extended round the entire area. And the relative degrees of sanctity in these areas

were measured by the distance from the Holy of Holies, which was the most sacred place of all.

The extreme exclusiveness of the Jews, as before noticed, had denied to the Gentiles any access beyond the lowest court; and, as we saw in the previous chapter, any advance beyond that point was punishable with death.

Now it had been the divine purpose that the Gentile should come into fellowship with the covenant blessings through the Jew, but observe that it was the divine plan that the Gentile should approach through the Jew; the disposition of the Hebrew people had resulted in the Gentile being kept at a distance through the Jew. The ideal relation had never developed on account of human failure to measure up to the ideal.

And may I say in passing that if the prophetic Scriptures mean what they say, the plan of GOD for blessing the nations of the world through Israel will yet be realized. Much time could be occupied in calling attention to Scriptures which express this, but let one illustration suffice. The opening words of Isaiah 60 are very familiar, but perhaps we have sometimes forgotten that they are addressed, not to the Church, but to Israel. **"Arise, shine; for thy light is come, and the glory of the LORD is risen upon thee. For, behold, the darkness shall cover the earth, and gross darkness the people: but the LORD shall arise upon thee, and his glory shall be seen upon thee. And the Gentiles shall come to thy light, and kings to the brightness of thy rising."**

At a time when the nations of the world are in great moral darkness, a light will shine upon Israel, and the nations will rally to the light.

Now when JESUS came into the world, He came - to use an expression of the apostle - as a **"minister of the circumcision."** That is, He deliberately came into the line of the succession of the prophets; He came to confirm the promises made to the Fathers as well as to fulfill them, and He addressed Himself almost exclusively to His own people. He recognized their unique place in the divine economy, and He gave them an opportunity of fulfilling their heavenly mission.

Do we appreciate the significance of the exclusiveness of the earthly ministry of CHRIST? The Jews regarded themselves as the people of privilege, the religious aristocracy; and in the best sense of the words they were. He took them at their own estimate of themselves, and thrust upon them the responsibility which such a position involved.

When therefore He sent the Twelve out into the cities and villages, He cast them upon the hospitality of the constituencies to which they went, without reserve (Matthew 10:9-15). And not only did He place upon Israel the responsibility which their exceptional covenant privileges involved, but in doing so He refused Himself to the Gentiles. Very explicitly did He commission the Twelve: **"Go not into the way of the Gentiles, and into any city of the Samaritans enter ye not; but go rather to the lost sheep of the house of Israel"** (Matthew 10:5-6).

The incident of the Syro-Phoenician woman illustrates this. To this religious outcast He declared, **"I am not sent but unto the lost sheep of the house of Israel."** But there must have been an inflection in His voice which denied the statement as defining the boundaries of His love, and she would not let Him go (Matthew 15:21-28).

So far then as the position and privileges of Israel as a separated people were concerned, JESUS CHRIST accepted the order of things as He found them. He himself had a Jewish ancestry. He was born of the line of David, according to the flesh, and of the seed of Abraham. He came as their Messiah. And thus in His own person He epitomized the privileges of Israel as no other man had ever done.

He was introduced to the nation by the greatest prophet that had ever crossed the stage of Israel's history. He announced Himself as having been sent to the **"lost sheep of the house of Israel"**; and He gathered about His person a company of men who were, everyone of them, Jews. And thus it came about that the Pentecostal Church was exclusively a Jewish body, if we include within that description the Gentile proselytes who had been incorporated into the body of Israel; and the Apostles were preaching only to Jews. Then something occurred which took the situation out of human hands: something broke loose, as it were.

But there was a sequence of events behind the new phenomena. Let us notice the main points of those events.

Stephen, who was one of the deacons of the Jerusalem church, had delivered a discourse which aroused the intense hostility of the ecclesiastics, and he had been stoned to death. A general persecution of the Church had followed. The believers who were resident in the capital city had been scattered everywhere. They had preached the Word wherever they had gone, and some of the Gentiles had listened in (Acts 11:19-20).

Now GOD foresaw that the admission of the Gentiles into the Church would create a serious problem, and He had already come into the situation in a very deliberate way. It was probably a little while before this that Peter, when he was staying in Joppa, had the vision which is recorded in Acts 10.

When Peter returned to Jerusalem, the more extreme Jewish party contended with him because he had eaten with Gentiles. But Peter rehearsed the whole matter to them from the beginning, and after he had concluded his account, we read that **"when they heard these things, they held their peace, and glorified God, saying, Then hath God also to the Gentiles granted repentance unto life"** (Acts 11:18).

After this, the news came to the Jerusalem church that the Gentiles were coming into the church at Antioch. This had come about through the preaching of those who had been scattered abroad in the way to which we have already referred. Barnabas was therefore sent as an official delegate to observe what was proceeding and to report back to the church. I say "to report back to the church" because this is the natural presumption; but when Barnabas saw what was taking place, he was so impressed with the opportunity which presented itself that he set out for Tarsus to seek for Paul; and it was more than a year before he returned to Jerusalem.

It was probably several years later than this, and after Paul had returned from his first missionary itinerary, that an unauthorized delegation went down from Jerusalem to Antioch and caused much disquietude in the church by insisting that Gentile Christians could not be saved except as they submitted to Jewish rites and obeyed the Mosaic law.

The contention assumed such seriousness that the Antioch church sent an official delegation to Jerusalem to discuss this matter with the Apostles and elders. This delegation was headed by Paul and Barnabas. A formal council was convened and, after much disputation, Paul and Barnabas were afforded an opportunity of rehearsing what GOD had done among the Gentiles through them.

And finally, a circular letter was prepared for distribution in the Gentile churches. It provided that "**no greater burden**" should be laid upon Gentile believers than that they should "**abstain from meats offered to idols, and from blood, and from things strangled, and from fornication**" (Acts 15:23-29).

Thus the apostles, under the acknowledged guidance of the Spirit of GOD, committed themselves to a definite policy. But it would seem that not even the apostles themselves apprehended at that time the true nature of that intimate union in which all distinctions of race and religion and caste and class are broken down and dissolved in the Body of CHRIST.

The apostles were, so to speak, legislating for the Gentiles; but even this position had not been arrived at easily: it had taken patience and courage and grace. And we must not suppose that the controversies were at an end. It was no easy matter to bury the history of centuries. And so we see the Early Church passing through mental and spiritual struggles as they made the transition from one dispensation to another.

But if any unity is to be of the highest order, it must be spontaneous and not mechanical; voluntary and not induced. And the highest expressions of unity frequently, if not always, find themselves through obstacles and reluctances; and so GOD allowed an inveterate hostility to grow up between two sections of the human race in order that it might receive a deathblow at the cross of CHRIST, and thus beget the closest bond of union, growing out of chastened, holy, humble love.

In the closing verses of this second chapter, the Apostle expresses that organic relationship, in which Jew and Gentile find themselves concorporate in CHRIST, in three figures of speech: as citizens of a commonwealth, as members of a household, as stones of a temple. In these three metaphors there is suggested three fundamental human relationships - relationships in which men stand to each other and to GOD. To the state as a subject: to the family as a child: to GOD as a worshiper. "**Now therefore,**" he says, "**ye are no more strangers and foreigners, but fellowcitizens with the saints**" (v. 19).

A sojourner (foreigner), under Greek laws and customs, was a resident who was not a citizen in the full sense of the term, and who had very restricted franchise rights. He was tolerated in the community, and that was about all. The term, then, had a meaning to them which it would not have to us.

And when the apostle took that word and that idea, and related it to their former religious life, they did not need anyone to interpret it. They had known what it was to be on the outside to be excluded from privilege, to be tolerated, to be aloof. But in CHRIST they were so no more.

In each of these metaphors Paul is catching up an idea which he has suggested before.

They had been "**aliens from the commonwealth of Israel, and strangers from the covenants of promise.**" Now they are fellow citizens with the saints. They have the full franchise rights of the kingdom of GOD.

But he employs not only the figure of the state: he introduces them into a family - "**the household of God.**" They are members of the family. This idea is brought over from verse 18, where he speaks of the Father. That is a family designation, a household word. And in a properly regulated household, all children are on a parity, all have the same rights - even adopted children.

In the third chapter the conception of fatherhood is again brought up, and will be considered there.

And then, lastly, the relationship to GOD as a worshiper:

"And are built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Jesus Christ himself being the chief corner stone; in whom all the building fitly framed together groweth unto an holy temple in the Lord: in whom ye also are builded together for an habitation of God through the Spirit" (vv. 20-22).

And once again the metaphor meant so much more to them than it does to us. Moreover his very choice of a word is significant. There were two words for the temple; the one applied to the structure in a general sense and might be used of the whole area, including the outer courts. The other word, the one he employs, was restricted to the temple proper. And that included the very holy place, where the Shekinah glory had been.

This is an unspeakably wonderful statement, and the implications are far-reaching and mysterious. He likens the Church to a temple in which GOD is taking up His abode. In Solomon's temple GOD had done this in a manifest way. But the manifestation was a means to an end. The Temple was the point of contact, the way of approach between GOD and man.

Is not the Church to be, through all the ages, the vehicle of the manifestation of the grace of GOD to the entire universe? Is not this what the Apostle implies when he says in the next chapter that he desires to make all see what is "**the fellowship of the mystery, which from the beginning of the world hath been hid in God . . . to the intent that now unto the principalities and powers in heavenly places might be known by the church the manifold wisdom of God**" (3:9-10)? And again: "**That in the ages to come he might shew the exceeding riches of his grace in his kindness toward us through Christ Jesus**" (2:7). An invisible temple, a heavenly priesthood, a means of access to the universe through eternity.

~ end of chapter 6 ~

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