

The Household of God

[Ephesians 2:11-22](#)

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To follow Jesus Christ is to be led to a new understanding of home. No longer is it the place where you are from. Now, home is the place where you are heading.

When the Apostle Paul went to Ephesus to nurture along the church, one of the things he must have noticed was the great Temple to Artemis. It was one of the seven wonders of the world. He couldn't miss it. But as a Jew, Paul wasn't even allowed in this grand structure. We know that there were also temples for the Pagan Mystery Cults, where worshipers participated in the dramatic life of heroic figures and received their strength. But Paul wasn't allowed in those temples either, which didn't bother him too much because he never wanted the church confused with a mystery cult.

As he typically did in a new city, Paul began preaching in the synagogue of Ephesus. That was all right for a few months, but then he and the church got kicked out of the synagogue. So they had to start meeting in a lecture hall. For two years the church continued in this lecture hall with both Jews and Greeks hearing the Word of the Lord.

So the church wasn't meeting in the great temple of Artemis or the temples of the mystery cults, because the Jews among them weren't welcome. And the church wasn't meeting in the synagogue, because the Greeks weren't welcome there. They are not in the temple. They are not in the synagogue. Thus, it's not surprising that Paul begins his letter to the Ephesians by reminding them that they are in Jesus Christ.

The call to live in Christ is the theme of the first chapter of Ephesians. In the second chapter, Paul expands further on this theme. He claims that in Christ the Jews and Greeks have all been made members of the one household of God. In Christ, the church has become a dwelling place for God. And in Christ, there are no dividing walls that separate people and create strangers.

I don't know a lot about construction, but I do understand the concept of a load-bearing wall. Those are the walls necessary to hold up the roof and keep the structure from falling in. The problem with an internal load-bearing wall is that whenever you want to do a little remodeling it's always that wall that's in the way. "You can't move that," the contractor says. "You're stuck with it." Thus, inevitably, load-bearing walls are dividing walls.

What Paul is telling us is that the church is a rather unique structure that has no dividing walls. Jesus Christ alone bears the load, and he has broken down all the dividing walls that separate people in his church. We may throw up a few walls so we can feel more comfortable in church. These are the walls that will separate the races, political parties, economic classes, the theological liberals from the conservatives, the righteous from the sinners. But those walls do not hold up the church of Jesus Christ. They can come down any time we are ready to repent our sin of dividing the Body of Christ. Jesus didn't build the church with those internal walls. And to be in Christ authentically means to enter a church where there are no strangers.

Religious institutions do not intend on creating strangers. They do it accidentally, when they become preoccupied with maintaining and protecting their purity. The Greek temple to Artemis had internal walls that protected its holy altar. So did the great Jewish Temple in Jerusalem, which had a wall that kept out Gentiles. Another wall divided men from women. Another wall separated the inner court from the outer courts. And a great curtain that guarded the Holy of Holies from a profane world.

It may have been the intent of all these walls to guard holiness, but the result of the walls was to create strangers. Greeks were strangers to the worship conducted by Jews, Jews were strangers to the worship conducted by Greeks, and everyone was a stranger to holiness.

In the death of Jesus Christ, the veil that divided the Holy of Holies from the world was ripped from top to bottom, allowing the holiness of God to rush out into the world God has never abandoned. So the last thing the church of Jesus Christ can do is to try to wall off, or protect, the holiness of God. It will just create strangers.

According to the second chapter of Ephesians, central to the definition of the church of Jesus Christ is that it is a place where there are no strangers. "In him, the whole structure is joined together and grows into a holy temple" (2:21). The holiness of the church is found not in its members, and certainly not in its clergy but only in Christ who loves to include strangers.

We live in a society that has always been anxious about strangers. But the stranger we worry about the most is the part of our own lives that we have labeled as profane and unholy. Most of us find it hard to live a perfectly integrated life. So we build a dividing wall in our hearts. For some the wall separates work from church. For others the wall separates faith from politics, or family from individuality. Still others try to divide the guilt of our sin from the profession of our faith, or the person we know ourselves to be from the one others expect us to be.

We think that with these interior walls, we'll be able to contain the profane stranger within us and protect the part of us that is holy. We'll just avoid the "bad neighborhood" part of our hearts. But until you allow Jesus Christ to break down the dividing wall in your own heart, you will never be able to participate in Christ's holy business of reconciliation on earth. Instead, you'll just keep externalizing the part of you that is not holy. So for the sake of the divided world around you, you have to know what it means to call Jesus Savior of all your life.

This is why Paul's letter to the church in Ephesus, and the church in Washington, D.C., is a constant invitation to live in Christ. We have a hard time understanding this phrase, "living in Christ," because we have been nurtured in individualistic values for a long time. We consider it a right, if not a responsibility, to live our own lives. But in ancient society, people attempted to live the life of someone who had gone before them. This is what the Gentiles were doing in the temple of Artemis. And it is what the Jews were accustomed to doing in their synagogues where they told the stories of the patriarchs, kings, and prophets. They were living vicariously. For example, when Jesus asked his disciples, "Who do people say that I am?" they responded by saying, "Some say Elijah, or John, or Jeremiah." The people knew these prophets were dead, but they thought Jesus was trying to follow the old practice of living in one of their great lives.

Paul is appealing to this common religious agenda by calling us to live the life of Jesus Christ. But as he repeatedly reminds us, we are never going to be able to live in Christ by imitating him. No, the Holy Spirit wants to engraft us into Jesus' identity.

"Your life," Paul tell us, "has already been lived." Your decisions have already been made. Your calling has already been given. Your morality has already been determined. And, best of all, your identity has already been established. You are no longer stranger or aliens, Gentile or Jew. You are now a member of the household of God. The Holy Spirit has adopted you into the Son's relationship with the Father, so that you are now the Beloved of the Father. And he loves all of you. Not just the good parts. That is because Jesus Christ has embraced and redeemed it all. So with the apostle you can say, "It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me."

If you get a bit confused along the way in life and you are in need of direction, or if you are in a frightening chapter of life and are in need of hope, look at the life of Jesus Christ. The story of your life has already been written in his life. And if you are in need of clarity about your mission, in Christ it becomes clear that you have received the calling to break down the dividing walls. Some of those walls divide our own hearts, others divide families and relatives, and others divide your office, your city, and your world. It is not an optional calling for the person who is living in Christ. To live in Christ means to accept this responsibility and sacred mission.

The hardest part of fulfilling that mission is that you have to leave home to do it. By home, I mean the old place of identity and comfort. The reason home is comfortable is because it has familiar walls around it. Like Christ, in Christ you have to leave home to enter the Household of God.

Some of you have to step away from the familiar words you heard as a child that said you were the smart one, or the pretty one, or the problem child. You are so much more. You are the beloved of the heavenly Father, but you will never believe that until you enter his new household.

Others of you have to step away from the political home you have known in order to discover new visions that transcend party platforms.

Still others of you have to step away from vocational homes where you have allowed yourself to be defined by your work. In the household of God you are defined only by the work of Jesus Christ.

All of us have to step away from the homes of familiarity and similarity. You cannot be in the household of God and ever be at home with people who look just like you. Because in the heavenly Father's home your brothers and sisters are different colors. In the Father's home there is room for all of the races. "Red and yellow, black and white, they are precious in his sight."

Lord God, turn your church into the visible body of Christ on earth, the dwelling place of God with us.