



# GRACE CHURCH

## New Temple

Ephesians 2:11-22

Grace Church | 11.7.21

The great Christian poet and preacher John Donne, confined by illness in 1623 to his bed for months on end, heard a lot of bells toll. Church bells, calling the congregation to worship on Sunday and prayer during the week, also called out to announce the gathering of a funeral service. What Donne concluded, after hearing so many bells, is that no bell is isolated. When you hear it, you may ask: for whom does the bell toll? Donne's answer: "it tolls for thee." Why? Because all who hear it are connected—like chapters in a great book—dependent on one another. And so famously Donne meditated on his bed, saying: "No man is an island entire of itself; every man is a piece of the continent, a part of the main."

Donne does not mean that every person has friends, but rather that every person wants friends. No one is truly alone. From the moment God said in the garden: "It is not good for man to be alone", there has never been a single human person born into the world who was entirely self-sufficient. There has never existed someone who can truly be said to be "alone". The monk has his prayers, the drunk has his bottle, the leper has his colony. In some way, be it the majority or the minority, we all belong.

As it turns out, a good way to test this theory is to look for what we worship. Donne heard the truth of commonality in the church bells, but we see it elsewhere now. Think about the Biblical example of the Tower of Babel—what was Babel but a place of worship? The people of the earth built a great tower by their own hands, in order to "make a name for themselves." Babel was their tower of worship, their temple of self. It was their beacon of interdependence, like the church bell for Donne. They could all see their great tower and be able to say together: we are all connected.

It may shock you to hear that the example of Babel is not alone in history. Plenty of thinkers have already compared the social internet age we live in to a new kind of Babel. First of all, like the tower, and the bells of 17th century England, we cannot escape it. Recently Facebook group, who also owns instagram, has come under fire for their inability to control negative false information on their platform. Traditional news outlets with standards of integrity are being pushed aside. So you don't have to even have a Facebook account to be affected by this. In an instant, anyone in this room, no matter your age or familiarity with technology, can communicate with someone across the globe, can take in information at a rapid rate, more quickly and sporadically than at any point in history. We are building a tower of connection and information—a tower to make a name for ourselves that reaches to the heavens—and we are doing it under the guise of community,



connection, and communication. We are breaking down barriers of alienation and hostility. No society has achieved what we have achieved, and it's only coming faster. For our children and grandchildren, the metaverse, where we can shake hands digitally and have real experiences through virtual reality, is right around the corner as the viable alternative to real face-to-face interaction.

No man is an island. But be it through towers or wifi connections, we still feel like islands. We have a profound propensity to both desire human unity and work against it rapidly. We love to divide: by ethnicity, by economic class, by interest, by age, by interest, by political affiliation. Look no further than our modern Babel of social media. What is meant to unify common humanity quickly becomes toxic division and strife. None of this is new—we have always built Babel's—temples to find togetherness in, meant to unify but only dividing. The original readers of Paul's letter to the Ephesians had two separate temples as well. In Jerusalem, the Jews had Herod's temple, built to worship Yahweh. Plastered on the outer wall of the temple was a sign that read: "No foreigner may enter within the barrier and enclosure round the temple. Anyone who is caught doing so will have himself to blame for his ensuing death." The Greeks had their own temple, the temple of Artemis, one of the seven wonders of the ancient world. We all have Babels, because no matter how introverted we are, we want to belong to a group, a family. We want a temple to worship what is most important to us: be it our political party, our social ideals, our intellectual pursuits, or simply our own narcissism. But our Babels will always fail.

We all have standards of belonging, but none of them can solve our fundamental problem. No man is an island—all mankind is interconnected. Why? Because we have one fundamental problem all of us share: we are spiritually dead. And our spiritual deadness separates us from God. Here is our first point then from the text: **no man made temple can bring us to God.**

## **No man-made temple can bring us to God.**

The relationship between these two ethnic groups with two separate temples was anything but amiable. Their Babels were falling in on themselves.

Paul actually reminds them of this in **verse 11. We divide by setting up standards of belonging based on law.** Firstly, we assume by outward appearances that either we do not belong or others do not belong. **Read verse 11.** The Jews were labeling the gentiles according to their obedience to the ceremonial law of Moses. They literally called them "the uncircumcision". The ironic thing, he points out, is that the gentiles are gentiles "in the flesh" because they are uncircumcised, but the Jews are also "made in the flesh by hands". Both of these identities, as "circumcised" and "uncircumcised" are based on outward adherence to religious law.

The problem is, if adherence to religious law is simply "the works of the hands" remember what we said last week. By grace you have been saved, not by the works of your hands, not by your ethnic



identity, not by your religious standards. Your earthly temple cannot save you, and it is not worth boasting in. So, **when boasting is eliminated, the ground for true unity is established.**

The reality for the Gentiles in this situation though, is that while the works of the hands of circumcision cannot save, neither can the works of the cult of Artemis. See, the Jews did have something Gentiles did not. They had promise, they had covenant. So there is no boasting for Gentiles either. **Verse 12**, they were without hope. Why? Because they had no knowledge of God. They didn't have the prophets or the patriarchs, the law of Moses. There's was a double alienation: alienated from God himself, and from the people of God or the commonwealth, the kingdom of God. The idea is simple: in the Old Testament, God created a kind of theocracy—where he ruled over his people politically through his law. The only way into that society was complete abandonment of Gentile cultural norms and customs and a embracing of circumcision and the law of God. There was one way in: through what was made with hands, through circumcision and the old temple. And yet still they could not enter fully: they would be accepted into the society, but not truly into the spiritual family, they would always be gentiles. And to be outside of God's kingdom: this is hopeless. But also, look at **verse 12** again, Paul says they were separated from *Christ*. The reason there is no hope if the Mosaic theocracy stands is because in that reality the Messiah, the Savior, the Christ, only came to his own people. He is not the Christ of the Jews! Finally, as if it could not get worse, they were cut off from the covenants. As gentiles, God had no agreement with us, no promises to us before Christ.

This is the great predicament. We can try as we may to build new societies of justice and peace and unity. We can connect our continents through trade and economy and communication. We can fight for multiculturalism and dream of a society where there are no division, where racial prejudice is no longer baked into history or society. That vision of that true Babel society may be linked for us to the American dream or the Progressive dream, but the great predicament is this: we are cut off from God. His kingdom is the only one that matters, his kingdom is the one we need to be citizens of! How do we get in that kingdom, short of fulfilling all the works of the law or going back in time to be born an ethnic Jew? Remember, Paul says. Remember, you were alienated and cut off from promise. Remember, when you try to set up extra standards of belonging. Remember how alienated you were. Nothing you do can bring you to God, nothing you do can create a new unity, a new society. You need a new temple. But before construction can happen, there is demolition.

## **The gospel demolishes our man-made temples.**

This is the promise on which the unity and belonging of the church of God stands. None of us belong, and we make sure we know it by setting up standards over one another that we can never meet. **Read verse 13.** But *now*, in Christ Jesus. *In* Christ Jesus. Through union with Christ, we see two things. What Jesus did and how he did it.

## **What Jesus Did**



**Jesus broke down all the walls we put up.** It's right there in **verse 13-14**. You who were once far off have been brought near. The strangers and the aliens and all those in the court of the gentiles have been brought near, and Christ himself acts as the peacemaker between the insiders and the outsiders. The dividing wall has been thrown to the ground.

You know what happened when the Berlin Wall was declared null on November 9, 1989? Maybe you folks a bit older than me remember. On that day when they started letting people across, the men and women of Germany didn't just cross the wall. They took pick-axes and hammers and chisels. They took to the wall, at places tearing it down completely.

There are no half-walls in the kingdom of God. When Christ's blood promises peace, it doesn't just make things a little chummier. No, the wall is torn down. We love to create all sorts of barriers and checkpoints into belonging, but the wall of hostility between men can only be broken down by what does the text say? We are brought near *by the blood of Christ*. What does this mean?

### **1) Set aside the law of outward belonging (15a)**

Jesus breaks down the walls and creates belonging by first abolishing all our laws that we have set up. **Look at verse 15**. Here Paul is speaking of the ceremonial aspects of the Mosaic Law, such as circumcision and different purification laws. These laws were meant to set apart the people of God. They are called ordinances here: not like we talked about last week, but Old Covenant ordinances and rules and regulations. Jesus came to set those aside. The way the people of God are now marked is not by outward signs of obedience to the ceremonial law, but by the Holy Spirit.

So too Jesus breaks apart any man-made law of belonging. Ask yourself this question: what standard of belonging have you set up that you expect others to fulfill? What temple, what babel, have you constructed? Maybe you have built your temple to worship success. So when others aren't as successful as you, you create this kind of ordinance: you cannot belong here with me until you pass this bar. But the ordinances are gone in the gospel.

### **2) Created a new humanity in Him (15b-17)**

**Read 15 again.** What happened when Jesus came to abolish the previous standards of belonging and make peace between us? Not just the absence of division, but a kind of belonging that is deep and rich. Remember how Jesus makes peace? By his blood. The blood of Christ makes peace between previously divided people. Here we have a new bloodline. You feel close to your family, even your distant relatives, because you share the same blood, the same DNA. But in the family of God, we have a bloodline that is perfectly pure and precious. The blood of Jesus covers us and makes us new and now runs in our veins. You have more in common with your brother or sister in Christ that you've never met than your closest unbelieving family member. Anytime you are tempted to create a standard of belonging, to erect a wall, you remember that the blood of Jesus tears walls down. It makes new bloodlines. Look at the person next to you. If they have repented of



sin and trusted in Christ alone, then you don't just share a religion with them. You may not even know them, but you are one with them—the Father has seen it fit that you are lumped together with them in Christ himself by the Spirit and through his blood. There is no wall between you that has not already been torn down, because you share a bloodline of *peace*. How can you not be at peace with your own flesh, your own blood? In your union with Christ by his blood, you have been unified with your brothers and sisters in the church.

This is what we are acknowledging in church membership. This is why we ask you to commit to the body, to belong and not just attend. Because in church membership we are giving our convictions teeth. We are saying: no barrier exists between me and you, so I will commit myself to love you and watch over you. We are a new humanity—a new kind of people. And get this: this new humanity is full of peace for those who are far off and those who are near. **Read 17 again.** It's for everyone. There is no room for racism or monoculturalism in the family of God. Yes, we are *exclusive*: there is one way into this family. We see it in our text: we enter in only by his blood. There is only one way in, no exceptions. We get into this family by joining ourselves to Jesus. His blood creates this whole reality. So *the way* is exclusive.

But the *family* itself is radically inclusive. All are welcome! Jew, Gentile, White, Black, Brown, Man, Woman, Single, Married, Broken, Whole, Healthy, Sick, outcasts all! Outcasts, down to the one. All are welcome. If we, as a Church, give any hint that the gospel of Jesus is reserved for only one kind of people, or that what is required before coming to Jesus is a clean, moral, Americana, white, privileged lifestyle, then our church has lost the gospel completely.

### 3) With full access to the Trinitarian God (18)

This is the last thing Jesus did. He not only gives peace to one another, he brings us all together into the presence of God. **Read verse 18.** What makes us the people of God is not just that we are unified together. It's all well and good if the wall of hostility is broken between one another, but what about our relationship with God? It doesn't mean anything for us to all hold hands into an eternity of enmity and separation from God.

Here is the gospel of entrance this morning. With Adam and Eve, all who bear the mark of sin are kicked out of the presence of God and can never enter back in. The moment we try to get close, we die. Our sin has cut us off from the Living God, and without the living God we have no life. But Jesus Christ, the God-man, was sent to lowly earth. And on the cross, he was cut off from the belonging of the Trinity as he bore your sin. He took that unbelonging to the grave and left it there as he rose. Now, in union with him by repentance and faith, we don't have to prove that we belong to God or to others. Because Jesus brought us in. Christian, God can no more cut you off from himself than he can cut off Christ.

This is ultimately what makes the people of God unique. Not only have we found the only perfect unifying source in the blood of Christ, we have found the only way to address our biggest problem: separation from God. Consider the importance of this: we are brought to God together. All those in



Christ have the same Spirit of God within them. Brought to the Father, Through Christ, in one Spirit. This means that you must kill any idea that you are more spiritual than any other believer. You might be more in step with the spirit, but the same spirit that dwelt in Christ dwells in every believer. The same power-source. We are all normally supernatural. There is no cause for envy and competition when God has taken us by the hand *together* and brought us to himself.

## **God is building a new temple through us.**

**Read with me 19-22.** I want you to notice three new identities of the unified people of God, and see three purposes flowing from those identities.

**First, we are Citizens (19a).** The unifying work of Jesus creates a new humanity, and it also creates a new world for those new humans to live in. When Jesus came to earth, he announced that he was bringing in a new order, a new regime. He brought the kingdom. Because he is the king. So now we live as people who are unified to serve under one Lord, Jesus Christ. We are citizens, with kingdom purpose.

Around this time, Ephesus had a population of about 250,00 people making it one of the largest cities in the ancient world. A report from around the same time, however, indicates that there were just over 1,000 citizens of Ephesus. See, in this time, most people were foreigners. They didn't belong to the city, and didn't receive all the rights of the city. They were outcasts, even if they were welcome to set up shop. They could only climb the social ladder so far. But what does Paul say: we are all citizens of God's kingdom. There is no second class.

**Second, we are Family (19b).** Not only are we brought into the kingdom as citizens, we are brought into the family of God. Members of his household. You might think that being a Christian means you work in the fields for the king you've never met. But in reality it means living with him in his castle. And the kind of family that he creates with his people is far more serious than any family you have experienced before. I'm drawn to this radical idea that Jesus brings up in Mark 3:31-35.

“And his mother and his brothers came, and standing outside they sent to him and called him. And a crowd was sitting around him, and they said to him, “Your mother and your brothers are outside, seeking you.” And he answered them, “Who are my mother and my brothers?” And looking about at those who sat around him, he said, “Here are my mother and my brothers! For whoever does the will of God, he is my brother and sister and mother.”

Are you seeing it? Jesus rips apart the nuclear family structure. He tears it to pieces. And he creates a new one. In the family of God, we are members of one another. Here is true unity—not a worship of ourselves, but a community. When one suffers, we all suffer. When one rejoices, we all rejoice.



**Third, We are Stones (20-22).** The last unifying purpose we see is that we are not just a kingdom or a family, we are a temple. **Read 20-22.** In the world of this letter to the Ephesians, they would have had in their mind two distinct temples. In Ephesus, the Gentiles worshipped at the temple of Artemis. A great architectural feat, it is known as a wonder of the ancient world. To see it was to stand in awe of its magnitude. The Jews, however, would think of Herod's temple, the temple to Yawheh in Jerusalem. This temple was unlike any other in size and scale. To them, this signified the height of God's presence and glory.

So in this context, Paul speaks of a different temple. A new temple. A better temple. Not a temple of division, nor a temple made by human hands. A temple made up of the people of God. In classic Pauline rhetoric, he uses a bunch of words here which have similar word roots in the original language. The root word is used here six times in verses 19-22, it's found in your English words for citizens, household, foundation, structure, temple and dwelling. The root word is *house*. What is Paul emphasizing? We are God's workmanship, created in Christ to be *holy*, look there in **21**, growing into a holy temple in the Lord. We are God's workmanship, but we are God's workmanship *together*. We are built on the foundation of the prophets and apostles, which is a pointer to the word of God being taught. That's our foundation. And the Word of God shows us our cornerstone, who is Christ. Being joined together, each of us are laid stones in God's new temple. Each of us is one link in the chain. We are all cut stones, shaped by God to be built into a place where he can dwell. This gives us a holy purpose. To be a place where God dwells, we have to be holy. The people of God are only built into the dwelling place of God if they are holy. And we can't be holy alone.

So see this. At Babel, the people of the earth said: "we will have unity in unholiness, in pride and power." So God did something crazy: he made all the languages of the world and all the ethnicities of the world. He created reasons to separate, to hate, to divide. From Babel the sin and evil of man turned even more wicked as men saw one another as other, as certain languages and skin colors began to be viewed as better, as more beautiful, as more like God. Who can reverse that great calamity? Who can build a new Babel, a new temple, whose foundation is holiness and whose end is togetherness? We can't. We can't do it—not our diversity efforts. But God has done it in the gospel. He will unite what no one else can: those near and those far off—all nations, under his kingdom. No boasting, only holiness. This is the reality of the church, the mystery of God revealed in Christ.

