

Dividing Wall is Down!

By Michele Hershberger

Key Verse: “For he himself is our peace, who has made the two one and has destroyed the barrier, the dividing wall of hostility” Ephesians 2:14.

Faith Story: Ephesians 2:11-3:13

Faith Focus:

Paul is writing to a church consisting of Jews and Gentiles. He refers to the historical reality of hundreds of years of hostility between the two ethnic groups. This hostility is epitomized in a wall of the Temple that has a sign warning Gentiles not to walk any closer to the Holy Place or risk death. But Jesus, says Paul, has torn down that wall so that the two humanities become one, with equal access to God. The Jews and Gentiles together become the New Temple, the dwelling in which God lives by his Spirit. This new reality—Jews and Gentiles being God’s people together—is the mystery spoken of in Ephesians 3. The Gentiles were meant to be heirs all along.

Session Goal:

To help youth name the people they consider to be “the other” and to ask Jesus to help them be reconciled to those groups.

Session Objectives:

- Write down “wall” that hinder our relationship with God, ourselves and others
- List all the ways Paul talks about Gentiles before Jesus died on the cross and after the cross.
- Discuss how the “wall of hostility” came down because of Jesus
- Name the mystery that is now revealed and list the phrases that explain that this was God’s purpose all along.
- Paint blocks as a prayer practice
- Tear down a wall as an act of prayer.

Materials Needed and Advance Preparation:

- Bibles
- White board and a marker
- Old cardboard boxes or big children’s blocks for the **Focus** activity
- Small wooden blocks the youth can write on for the **Connect** and **Apply** activities (perhaps you can ask an older member of your congregation to make 2 x 2 or 3 x 3 cubes)
- Markers or pens for each youth to use to write on blocks
- White paint that dries quickly to cover the wooden blocks
- Paint brushes for every two persons

SESSION OUTLINE

Focus: (12 minutes)

After the youth have arrived, direct them to the big blocks you’ve brought (or made). Put them into two teams and have them compete to see who can build the tallest wall. Then, have

them work as teams again to see which team can build the sturdiest wall. Finally, see which team can build the most creative wall.

Connect: (7-9 minutes)

Pass out prizes for everyone and sit down to reflect. Ask them to sit for a moment in silence and think about these questions: What are the “walls” in your life? What “walls” keep you from other people or from your dreams and hopes? Then pass out the small wooden blocks and markers and ask them to write some of things that are “walls” for them on one or two sides of their blocks. Ask them to keep at least one side of the block unmarked at this time. Transition into the Bible study with this statement: *The apostle Paul and the early Christians had a huge wall to deal with—the wall of hostility between Jews and Gentiles. It harmed both groups. The Gentile Christians felt like they were lower class and the Jewish Christians suffered from feelings of pride that, deep inside, they knew were not right. Turn to Ephesians 2 to see what Paul has to say about this.*

Explore the Bible: (20 minutes)

Ask for a volunteer to read Ephesians 2:11-22. Then, ask them to join up in pairs and look through the verses in the first paragraph (2:11-13) to find all the ways that Gentile Christians are described. They should find these phrases: Gentiles by birth, uncircumcised, separate from Christ, excluded from citizenship in Israel, foreigners to the covenant of the promise, without hope and without God in the world, you who were once far away. Have the groups report what they found.

Now in the same pairs, have them look at verses 19-22 and to again write down all the ways Gentile Christians are described. They should find these phrases: no longer foreigners and aliens, fellow citizens, members of God’s household, you too are a dwelling in which God lives by his Spirit. After reporting their findings, ask, *So what happened to make these drastic changes?* If they struggle to come up with an answer, direct them to the middle section of the passage, verses 14-18. Help them articulate what all Jesus did to help take away the hostility of these two groups. Give a mini-lecture on the intensity of that hostility. Be sure to include these points:

When Paul talks about the dividing wall of hostility, he is referring to a real wall (as well as a metaphor). In the Temple, there was a wall that had a sign that read: Gentiles keep out or you will be killed. Gentiles could not enter into the main section of the Temple area because they were not ethnic Jews.

Both groups hated each other. Some Jews, if not the majority, understood that because God chose them (Abraham, Gen. 12:3) this meant they were God’s favorites. Peter, one of Jesus’ disciples, believed this and this is why God sent a sheet of clean and unclean animals to him in Acts 10. See Acts 10:34 for his new understanding of what being chosen meant.

Now ask the youth, “Given this great tension between the two groups, what Paul says about Jesus is remarkable. What does Paul say Jesus does to take care of this problem?”

The group should make a list similar to this:

- Jesus has made the two groups one and his purpose was to create in himself one new humanity out of the two.
- Jesus has destroyed the barrier, the dividing wall of hostility, by abolishing in his flesh the law’s demands.
- Jesus puts to death their hostility; he reconciles both groups to God through the cross.

- He preaches peace to both, to all.
- Through Jesus, the two groups have equal access to God by one Spirit.

Now ask a volunteer to read Ephesians 3:1-13. These verses talk about a “mystery.” In pairs for the final time, ask the groups to find out what the mystery is (that Gentiles were to be equal heirs with Jews all along). Here are some of the phrases they should find:

Mystery was made known to Paul through revelation

In former generations this mystery was not known (this explains why Jews naturally thought the gospel was just for them)

Mystery is this: (verse 6) Gentiles have become fellow heirs, members of the same body, and sharers of the promise

Paul has been appointed by grace to bring the gospel to the Gentiles and to help everyone understand this mystery

When this happens (Jews and Gentiles together) the wisdom of God is made known to the rulers and authorities in heavenly places

All of this is in accordance to God’s eternal purpose in Jesus

Wrap up this discussion with these questions, “*What did it feel like for the Gentile Christians who first heard this letter read out loud to them? What did it feel like to the Jewish Christians when they heard it for the first time?*”

Apply: (10 minutes)

Say, *Okay let’s talk about what Paul—and Jesus—are saying to us. In our situation, are we more like the Jewish Christians or the Gentile Christians? Why?* If the group identifies themselves more like the Jewish Christians of Paul’s day, then ask them who are the contemporary “Gentiles” they look down on. If they identify themselves as Gentile Christians, then ask them who the “Jews” are in their lives. For both groups:

Don’t let them “get off the hook” too easily. Even if they do see themselves as the “Gentiles” in this story, they may very well have other “Gentiles” they look down on. For youth who do see themselves like the “Jews” in this story, help them think about more than the obvious groups—ask them to reflect deeply.

Emphasize Jesus’ solution—the cross. The cross shows us love to the extreme; there is nothing so bad (even crucifixion) that God will not endure to show us love. Ask this question: *Can we truly love our enemies without first experiencing God’s love and transformation in our own lives?*

Remind the group that whether we are Gentiles or Jews, we must bring our hatred and hostility to Jesus. This is what church is—a place where everyone is equally welcome, a place where people who normally would hate each other actually love each other.

At the end of this discussion, have each youth write on his/her block the persons or group he/she sees as the “other” or as “Gentiles.” Sit in silence as the students write and then hold their blocks. Give them time to think and pray.

Respond: (7 minutes)

Now pass out the white paint and brushes. Say, *I know that white paint doesn’t really take away the names that you wrote on your blocks. The paint only covers over them. Jesus is better than white paint; he can actually take away our hostility. But to help us visualize this miracle, I’m asking you to paint over the words you wrote on the sides of your block and as*

you do, I want you to pray that Jesus take away these hostilities and walls that hinder you. Paint in silence. Let God's Spirit speak to you as you paint.

When the youth are done and the paint is at least semi dry, ask them to put these blocks together to form one final wall, a wall that you as a group will kick down. Build the wall with the white blocks, make sure it is stable and then ask several students to pray for the wall to come down. After the Amen, have fun giving that wall a shove.

Insights from Scripture:

In these verses Paul is making some profound statements. He is redefining a crucial definition for Jewish believers—what it means to be God's chosen people. In Genesis 12:3, God chose Abram. What exactly does it mean to be chosen or elected? Does it mean you are God's favorites? And even if it does, what exactly does "favorite" mean? The scripture says that God chose Abram so that through him, all the families of the earth will be blessed. The implications of that is—mission. According to Gen. 12:3, somehow everyone will be blessed—even Gentiles.

This tension—being chosen because you are God's favorite or being chosen because you have a mission to do—plays itself out all throughout the Old and New Testament. Old Testament stories could be used to argue both ways. Ruth is not of the bloodline, but she is the ancestor of King David. God rescues all the slaves from Egypt, not just the descendents of Jacob and early on other people groups join and become equal members of God's people. On the other hand, Ezra comes back from exile in Babylon and denounces the Jewish men who have married foreign wives and makes them divorce, without asking if these women are willing to worship Yahweh.

Most if not all the Jews of Jesus' day see their chosen status as one of being God's favorites. Even the disciples believe this. It is for this reason that Peter needs the vision he receives in Acts 10. Before the experience with the sheet of clean and unclean animals, Peter can't imagine a world where Gentiles become equal Christians with Jews. But, as he watches Cornelius and the other Gentile speak in tongues praising God, he says, "I truly understand that God shows no partiality, but in every nation anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him" (Acts 10:34). Cornelius' conversion is the beginning of Gentile believers. Peter, Paul and the other church leaders meet to decide what to do about this phenomenon in Acts 15. On the surface their decision is that Gentile men do not have to be circumcised, or in other words become Jewish before they can be Christian. The deeper issue is whether or not Gentiles can really be considered equally loved and a part of God's people.

Paul in these verses is affirming this decision, to the point of saying that the wall of hostility is now torn down by the cross of Christ. Paul goes so far to say that this "people out of all peoples" is what God has wanted all along. It is the eternal purpose that God carried out in Jesus. Perhaps it was a mystery not because God wanted it to be, as evidenced by the Old Testament stories where Gentiles did join God's people, but because of the unfaithfulness on the part of God's people. Let it be our prayer that, through the Spirit, we don't make that same mistake.