

Walls #3: Tearing Down Walls

In the previous two lessons, we looked at how to rebuild protective walls around the church and us individually. We made several observations from the book of Nehemiah, when he organized and led the Jews in rebuilding the walls of Jerusalem, about 140 years after they were torn down by the Babylonians.

Walls can be good (as in the case of Nehemiah and the applications made previously), but they can also be bad. Good walls need to be built/rebuilt, and bad walls need to be torn down.

What are “bad” walls? There are walls of ignorance, unbelief, superstition, false teachings, mistrust, fear, hatred, bitterness, unforgiveness, etc. These walls hinder us from seeing God’s goodness, or provisions, or the love of family and church. But the process of building good walls and tearing down bad walls is often similar – it is largely by reading, understanding, and applying the Word of God in the church and our own lives. In the process of tearing down the bad walls, we are simultaneously erecting new walls of faith, trust, love, and hope.

1. Walls of ignorance

Here the term “ignorance” does not mean stupidity, but a lack of knowledge and understanding. For example, I am ignorant of crochet, transmission rebuilding, and speaking Italian. This does not mean I am unable to learn about those things, but merely that I have not made any effort to do so.

There are many walls of ignorance in matters of religion. Unbelievers have mistaken impressions of what Christianity is. Heathens frequently worship false gods. In Ac. 17:23 on Mars Hill, Paul began to preach to the Athenians about the one true God, “... I found an altar with this inscription, TO THE UNKNOWN GOD. Whom therefore ye ignorantly worship, him declare I unto you.” Their altar was proudly proclaiming their ignorance – that among the many gods they recognized, there was probably one that they had missed, and so they were trying to “cover their bases” with this altar. Paul wisely used that as a pretext for proclaiming the gospel as the truth concerning this unknown God.

There are different kinds of ignorance. The simple kind is when one doesn’t know something, or possibly even that there is something to be known. A more serious ignorance is when people refuse to know – they reject knowledge. Hos. 4:6 – “My people are destroyed for lack of knowledge: because thou hast rejected knowledge, I will also reject thee ...”

Unfortunately there is also ignorance among real Christians. They have believed and been converted, but do not proceed much further. They remain “baby Christians”. Will you tell God on the judgment day, “I didn’t know that!”? He may respond “It was in the Word. You had the time and ability, just not the inclination to learn it.” To tear down walls of ignorance we need to have a desire to know the truth, and a willingness to live according to it when we do find it.

An agnostic claims to be ignorant – “I don’t know if there is a God.” A stronger agnosticism says “It is impossible to know whether God exists.” Behind each though, I suspect there is an unwillingness to know the truth. They may not care if there is a God (apathy), but more likely they don’t want to know a God exists because it would force them to make an unpleasant choice (“Will you serve this God who exists, or will you continue to live as if you were God?”)

If we want no longer to be ignorant, we need to desire the truth, to actively pursue it, and then be willing to conform to it. Where is the truth that delivers us from spiritual ignorance? The Word (the Bible)!

Jn. 17:17 – “Sanctify them through thy truth: thy word is truth.”

Ps. 119:104 – “Through thy precepts I get understanding: therefore I hate every false way.”

Ps. 119:105 – “Thy word is a lamp unto my feet, and a light unto my path.”

Ps. 119:130 – “The entrance of thy words giveth light: it giveth understanding to the simple.”

When we are first born again, we are spiritually ignorant of almost everything, except the bare essentials of the gospel (there is a God, I am a sinner and thus separated from God, Jesus was (is) the Son of God

who came and bore the penalty of my sins on the cross, he was raised from the dead, and if I believe on him I will receive forgiveness and become a child of God). The common testimony of men is that before becoming a Christian, they tried to read the Bible but just couldn't understand it, but that afterwards (and especially after receiving the baptism in the Holy Spirit), they could understand it. What previously was a "mystery" now becomes life to us. The more we read and study and are taught from the Word, the more true understanding we have, and the more those walls of ignorance fall down.

2. Walls of superstition

What is superstition? It is a belief that normal occurrences of life are either predictors of future events (good or bad), or even the cause of future events; that somehow if we do or do not do certain things, or do them in a certain way, we can avoid unpleasantness or bring satisfaction. Superstitions are believed or at least practised, without any evidence or proof that they are valid.

Where ignorance is a lack of knowledge, superstition is a false knowledge. It may be irrational fears (walking under a ladder, Friday 13, black cats, etc.), but it may also be of a religious or even of an occult nature. For example, believing in the Catholic doctrines of transubstantiation, purgatory, praying to saints, candles and rosary beads, etc. I have heard that the Amish also have some superstitions concerning stomach aches. Many people believe in "water witching", which is an occultic practice. Athletes wear their "lucky socks" or go through a pre-game ritual that they think will bring victory.

To believe in superstitions is to believe that our lives are influenced or controlled by things that bear no apparent relation to an outcome. Why would the 13th of a month falling on a Friday be any different than any other day/date? It is a fear that if we don't perform certain actions just right, we will somehow suffer. This can affect people's prayers. They think if they don't recite the words in just the right way, or if they left something out, or didn't recite the words enough times, the prayers will be ineffectual. Mt. 6:7-8

I can understand why the Christian life appears to some skeptics as being merely superstition, because we believe things that we cannot see. Jn. 20:29 – "Jesus saith unto him, Thomas, because thou hast seen me, thou hast believed: blessed *are* they that have not seen, and *yet* have believed." But there is a difference between genuine superstitions ("It is bad luck to (fill in the blank)"), and the things that we take by faith, based on the Word of God. Faith is the evidence of things not seen (Heb. 11:1).

Most superstitions involve fear ("something bad will happen if I don't do something exactly right"), or misplaced hopes ("something good will happen if I do this and that"). If they are performed in expectation of blessing from God, they show a complete misunderstanding of prayer. God does not bless us or answer our prayers because we do or do not properly perform some set of actions, but because we are his children and are praying in faith according to his will. 1 Jn. 5:13-15 – "...And this is the confidence that we have in him, that, if we ask anything according to his will, he heareth us: And if we know that he hear us, whatever we ask, we know that we have the petitions that we desired of him."

3. Walls of false teaching

People who have been in churches that teach heresies (Jehovah's Witnesses, Mormons, ...) or errors ("you can't be saved unless water baptized", "tongues are not for today", "miracles passed away with the early church", ...) have walls erected that prevent them from seeing the truth. Ronald Reagan said "It isn't so much that liberals are ignorant. It's just that they know so many things that aren't so." This applies to many churches also. Until we resolve to take our beliefs from the Word alone, we will continue to be blocked from truth by walls of false teaching.

People who have been taught that the Baptism in the Holy Spirit is not for today, and that tongues are at best scary and at worst evil, will never be able to receive the Baptism experience until they tear down those walls by going to the Bible and asking what it says about the subject.