

Editorial: Heaven's wall, a border wall, and our call

January 16, 2019

Baptists agree on some things. I won't list them here because Baptists disagree on so many of the particulars of those things that I'd have to qualify the list as I write it.

I will mention one thing, though. Baptists agree there is a heaven, but, as I stated a moment ago, we diverge on so many details about it. One Baptist, Robert Jeffress, suggests in recent comments about the border wall that the United States is a prototype of heaven. Others would disagree.

Is heaven's wall a blueprint for a border wall?

Shortly after the start of the partial government shutdown in Dec., Jeffress spoke on [Fox & Friends](#) about the legitimacy of a border wall.

Referring to his sermon on Nehemiah during the inauguration of President Trump, Jeffress said: "Mr. President, God is not against walls. Walls are not unChristian. The Bible says even heaven is gonna have a wall around it. Not everyone's going to be allowed in."

The not-so-subtle implication is "on earth as it is in heaven."

Various Baptists agree that the Bible does contain a description of a wall around "the new Jerusalem," which the author of Revelation describes as "coming down out of heaven from God" (Revelation 21:10), which I don't think Trump's wall will do.

Revelation describes the heavenly wall as “a great, high wall with twelve gates” (21:12) and that is “144 cubits thick” (21:17)— $12 \times 12 = 144$, “made of jasper” (21:18), and set on “twelve foundations, [on which] were the names of the twelve apostles of the Lamb” (21:14).

The literalists among Baptists might take issue with Jeffress’ biblical support of Trump’s border wall. If the United States were to build a wall on its southern border like the one Jeffress says will be around heaven, we will need much more than \$5 billion—just for the wall. Never mind the foundations, much less paving the crumbling infrastructure of the nation with pure gold, which isn’t part of the wall but is an oft-cited feature of heaven (21:21).

Those who take Revelation figuratively may wish to focus on the significance of the number 12 and its multiples.

Meanwhile, people in the pew would like to know what’s for lunch, and unpaid government workers would like to know when they’ll see a paycheck again.

A short history of border walls

In Oct. 1989, my family drove from Braunschweig, West Germany, to Berlin, passing through the East German checkpoint, crossing East Germany, and passing through another checkpoint to enter West Berlin.

While in West Berlin, we entered East Berlin by a checkpoint underneath the Berlin Wall. Everything about that day seems surreal now.

During our month-long stay in West Germany, we heard the constant news reports discussing the future of West and East Germany. They were intense discussions full of certainty about the untenableness of the present and uncertainty about the future.

Nov. 9, 1989, just days after we returned home to the United States, people scaled the Berlin Wall and began to tear it down—that supposedly impenetrable wall—one hammer swing at a time.

Though I still have a piece of it, the Berlin Wall doesn't keep anyone in or out anymore. Nor does the Great Wall or Hadrian's Wall.

One of the tragedies of the Berlin Wall was it separated Germans from each other. Many people lost their lives trying to find freedom or reunite with family on the other side of that wall.

One of the ironies of the Berlin Wall is [Ronald Reagan's call](#) to Mikhail Gorbachev from the Brandenburg Gate—a place I stood two years after his speech—to “tear down this wall.” Reagan's call to tear down a wall built to control people is ironic because his political party is now largely supportive of building a different wall in a different place with a similar purpose.

The Berlin Wall didn't last. Will this proposed wall be any different?

Remembering our call while people talk about walls

As Baptists, we can appreciate Jeffress' view of the Bible as authoritative. On that, we can agree.

Where we might differ is over the best part of heaven's description to use in the current debate. Jeffress wants to support Trump's wall and thus uses heaven's wall as justification for the idea.

To Jeffress' point, yes, countries need borders, in part to keep straight where one country ends and another begins.

But is a border wall the best and most imaginative expression of such a

boundary?

More importantly for those who think the United States is not a prototype of heaven and that allowing people into the United States does not automatically fulfill the gospel: Is the idea of a wall to keep people out the best and most imaginative way for us to live out the Christian call in this world?

Baptists—among other Christians—view themselves as called by the Great Commission, or Jesus' command to "go and make disciples of all people, teaching them to obey everything" Jesus taught us.

One of the reasons we are compelled to do just that—to go and make disciples—is because Jesus promises heaven to those who follow him, a place where God will dwell with God's people, a place where God "will wipe every tear from their eyes," a place where "there will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things" will have ended (Revelation 21:3-4). And we all say, "Hallelujah!"

What we ought to work on is not something made of steel, concrete, barbed wire or jasper. What we ought to work on is communicating Christ in this world in word and deed.

The question for us as followers of Christ—Baptist or otherwise—is not how to keep people out but how to make sure people get in.

How are we making disciples of Christ—and therefore bringing people into heaven—through our response to the needs of people in this world?

How are we communicating the good news of Jesus as he did—good news that addresses the whole person, physical and spiritual?

No matter how ["totally effective while at the same time beautiful"](#) any proposed border wall may be, may it not distract us from answering the

right question. Will we secure a border and forfeit souls?

Eric Black is the executive director, publisher and editor of the Baptist Standard and a former pastor. He can be reached at eric.black@baptiststandard.com or on Twitter at [@EricBlackBSP](https://twitter.com/EricBlackBSP).