



## Fences Are for Dogs

I just finished putting up a couple of sections of five-foot chain-link fence to contain a new puppy—and improve the security of our home. At first, I got a hefty estimate from a fence contractor—but for about 20 percent of that amount, our local mega-hardware store had all the materials and instructions. So I built the fence myself, a little at a time, sustaining only minor injuries.

I'm told our new dog (a Decker Rat Terrier) will probably be able to scale the fence by the time he matures. Until then, the yard is secure. We didn't have much trouble with our late dogs. As they were both aging, with failing eyesight and arthritis, they had little desire to run off. Most days they moseyed in and out through the doggie door to our living room without incident. A few times they followed their noses down the street, but they always came back or were easy to find.

I expect our new puppy will be much more rambunctious. Terriers were originally bred to keep homes and farms vermin free. Vermin hunting requires hyper-alertness, agility and independent thinking, so in general it takes more effort to train terriers than their more docile cousins. Because of their doggedness, you can be sure they will find ways to escape and do their own thing, which is why we need a good fence.

Actually, I'd rather not have a fence. It's a lot of work. I would much prefer to have a nice talk with my dog, after which he would understand and agree with my intentions, remain in the yard and stay out of trouble. But he's an animal. Animals, kids and even some adults who pose a danger to themselves and others need fences.

Fences are a little like laws and rules. In a perfect world we would all behave sensibly and we wouldn't need any restrictions. But if you've driven in traffic recently, it's clear that we do NOT live in a perfect world and we absolutely need regulations—not just for traffic but for nearly every other aspect of society.

And then there are religious fences. It's instructive that God gave one nation a highly regulated system of commandments, ordinances and rituals, along with blessings for obedience and curses for disobedience—religious fences to keep folks out of trouble. Yet the system never really worked.

The people found ways to dig under, climb over and cut through the fences. At the same time their religious leaders were building extra fences and barriers to make sure their followers couldn't escape. That didn't work either, resulting in a religiously enslaved population.

About that time Jesus entered the picture—inside the fence. He revealed God to us. Religious fences were rendered obsolete. We

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no longer need them. Humans are free to live in accord with God's grace and to follow Jesus. He offers us as much freedom as we can handle (2 Corinthians 3:17; Galatians 5:1).

It all seems so simple—and graceful—yet two millennia later, institutional religionists are still complicating the matter by throwing up a maze of unnecessary fences and barriers (allegedly to protect the people, but actually to protect the religious institutions!).

Unfortunately, a lot of folks like being confined by religious fences. It just feels so safe and comfortable in there.

What can we do about it? 1) we can stop building our own religious fences, 2) we can boldly walk out of religious fences others have created for us and 3) we can help our fenced-in friends find freedom. The last one may get a little dicey, and it isn't for everybody. But we can drop a gentle hint when the time is right.

Meanwhile, back in our yard, I fully expect our new dog will try to get around my fence one way or the other. Those will be teachable moments, as much for me as for the dog! □

—Monte Wolverton