

Ephesians 2:11-22 (DHT)

¹¹ Therefore, remember that you once were Gentiles in the flesh, called uncircumcised by those called circumcised, done with hands in the flesh—at that time you were independent from Messiah, excluded from Israelite citizenship, and foreigners to the covenants of promise, having neither hope nor God in the cosmos; but now in Jesus Messiah, you who were once far became near in the blood of Messiah. He is our peace, for having made both one and having removed the hostile wall of walls, he nullified the law of dogmatic commandments in his flesh, that he might create the two into one new man in himself, making peace; that he might reconcile both into one body to God through the cross, having killed the hostility by it [the cross].

¹⁷ Having come, he preached the Gospel: peace to you who are far and peace to those who are near, that through him we both have access to the Father in one Spirit. So then, you are no longer foreigners and aliens, but citizens with the saints and the household of God, having been built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Jesus Messiah himself being the cornerstone, in whom all of the building, having been framed together, grows into a holy temple in the Lord, in whom you are also being built together as a dwelling place of the Spirit of God.

Introduction and Biblical Background to the Circumcision Dispute

In one of his works on the Book of Acts, my professor Patrick Schreiner says that, “The New Testament is largely written to deal with the Jew and Gentile dispute in light of Jesus’s arrival. If this is what the New Testament concerns, then it is remarkable that 27 percent of the New Testament (Luke-Acts) comes from a Gentile mind, heart, and quill.”¹ The Jew and Gentile dispute touched the heart of the Gospel. Believers who were described as Pharisees insisted new Gentile converts must be circumcised and obey the commands of Moses *prior* to their inclusion into God’s family. Where did this idea come from?

In Genesis, God promised a man named Abraham that God would bless Abraham *and the Gentile nations* specifically through a singular offspring of Abraham. Abraham struggled with unbelief because he and his wife were quite old. His wife gave her slave to Abraham to provide a son, but this was a faithless act. God promised the offspring of blessing would come from the sexual union of Abraham and his wife Sarah, a promise Abraham believed, and he was thus declared righteous *by his faith*. Notice the order. God *then* entered into a formal covenant with

¹ Patrick Schreiner, *The Mission of the Triune God: A Theology of Acts* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2022), pg. 19-20.

Abraham, instituting circumcision as the sign of the promise. All males in the family and all males on their eighth day of life thereafter were to be circumcised as a reminder of God’s promise to Abraham that one of his offspring would be through whom God would bless the ends of the earth. If they disobeyed, their penalty was to be cut off from the promise; you’re either cut *into* the covenant community, or you’re cut *out* of the covenant community, excluded from the benefits of the promised blessing resulting from Abraham’s one, future offspring.²

What was the point of this sign of circumcision and why was it only given to the males? The promise God gave to Abraham was connected to his sexuality. It was an offspring that would come from Abraham’s own body who would be the catalyst of God’s blessing to the Gentiles. Abraham’s sexual organ was the instrument through which the promise would be realized, so the covenant sign for this previously-given and previously-believed promise of an offspring are connected, in that both the believed-promise and the sign to remember the promise involved the male sexual organ of Abraham and all of his descendants until the promise came. This did not mean women were excluded from the covenant community; it simply means the sign corresponds to the promise.

This promise was fulfilled when the singular offspring of Abraham finally came, the person Jesus of Nazareth. That Jesus is *the* promised offspring is clear by Matthew and Luke’s genealogies. Is circumcision still a necessary initiatory rite into the covenant community? No. In Colossians 2, Paul recalls Moses’ words from Deut. 10 that it was more important to circumcise one’s heart than any other body part; through baptism, our hearts are circumcised. *Prior* to the arrival of Jesus, circumcision was a sign of the promise that awaited fulfillment and baptism is a sign that celebrates fulfillment. Baptism corresponds to circumcision in that it is also an initiatory rite into the covenant community, but it is different in that it is available to all ethnicities, done to both genders, and remembers a past fulfillment rather than hopes for some still-future fulfillment. What changed was that the content of the believed-promise was realized in Jesus, *the* promised offspring of Abraham, whose life, death, resurrection, and exaltation brought God’s unyielding blessing to all the earth, to all who put their faith in his resurrection and submit to him exclusively as their Lord.

² The generation of Israelites who wandered through the wilderness who was prevented from entering the Promised Land did not obey the command to circumcise. Joshua 5:4-7 says the Israelites had to circumcise everyone again in a covenant-renewal prior to entering the land because none of their parents bothered to do it while they wandered.

This distinction between circumcision and baptism is easier for us to understand 2,000 years on from the earthly life of Jesus. But in the immediate context, this was a dynamic, systemic change in the life of Israel. It is perhaps easy for us to read these Pharisees in Acts 15 who insisted Gentiles must be circumcised and think “How ridiculous! How could you be so wrong?” But we must remember that Luke does not call these individuals outsiders or infiltrators, but fellow-believers who belonged to the Pharisee faction. They were wrong, yes, but not outside the Christian community.

I think this is important because sometimes our Reformed tradition has been criticized as having an overly-purist attitude toward what we believe. There is a prominent Reformed social media influencer who has made it her mission to point out the flaws and errors in any preacher who seems to go against anything her idol John MacArthur has said. And yes, it is imperative to point out false-teaching, but doing so is always in Scripture for the purpose of *correction* or *edification*—her approach is to finger-point and question the faith of both the wrong preachers *and* those who attend their churches. This approach really bothers me; “guilt-by-association” is antithetical to the Gospel; we’re all sinners, so we’re all guilty... To be sure, I’m not saying it is okay or right to believe wrong things. I’m simply saying it is possible to be a real Christian and be wrong about secondary issues of theology without intending to be deceptive; it’s possible to misspeak, to misinterpret, or not-yet sufficiently understand something, which is why we need *edifying-correction* from within the Church community so we may unite around truth rather than seek reasons to exclude.

In this tumultuous time of transition for the Church,³ these wrong believers were able to make their case based on their convictions about God’s Word and who they had been as a people. They were right in what Scripture stated in a technical sense; but they were wrong in their application of it, for circumcision pointed ahead to the Messiah, and a sign pointing ahead to the Messiah was no longer necessary if the Messiah had come.

Peter, Paul, and Barnabas all experienced *Gentiles* receiving the Holy Spirit without becoming Jewish first and this outpouring of the Spirit coincided with the Scriptures, including

³ “*Ethnically*, the new community now consisted of both Jews and Gentiles, which caused problems. Jews wondered whether welcoming Gentiles to table-fellowship necessarily implied the abandonment of their ancestral faith. *Politically*, Gentiles wondered how they fit into a religious movement that had its roots in Judaism, and all Christians pondered how their newfound faith inhabited the Empire. *Socially*, this community consisted of both rich and poor, and the culture of the day had a wide separation of the two groups. In terms of *gender*, women were a large contingent of the early church, and Luke wrote to affirm the diversity. *Supernaturally*, the community was under attack by demonic forces and the power of Satan.” Schreiner, 24, emphases original.

the programmatic promise to Abraham that through Jesus the Gentiles would be covenantally-blessed *alongside* Israel. Peter concluded his remarks by saying: *We believe that we will be saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus, just as they will* (vs. 11). Then James, the Jerusalem Council president, gave the decisive ruling in agreement with Peter that all are saved by grace alone because God’s plan revealed in his covenant with Abraham was to extend covenant blessings to *all nations* of the earth. So the Jerusalem Council wrote a letter to all Christians, Jews and Gentiles alike, informing them of the Holy Spirit’s decision that salvation for all is by grace alone, that though Gentiles *did* need to make *holiness* the lifestyle of their new identity, their new identity did not require them to become Jewish.⁴

Ephesians 2

After the Jerusalem Council made their decision, Paul wrote this letter to the Ephesians, to Gentile believers. In Ephesians 2 Paul recounts the common salvation-story of all people. We can hear echoes of Peter’s declaration from Acts 15 throughout. Peter declared: *We believe that we will be saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus, just as they will*. Paul says: *We were children of wrath, by nature, just as they were* (vs. 3). *You are saved by grace!* (vs. 5) *For you are saved by grace through faith, and this [faith] is not of yourselves; it is the gift of God—not from works that no one can boast* (vss. 8-9).

Paul then goes right into the topic of circumcision vs. uncircumcision as code for Jew and Gentile. Eph. 2:11-12 correspond to Eph. 2:1-3 in that Paul is calling on his Gentile audience to remember the time in which they were not saved. Your past is a place of reference, but not a place of residence—for the glorious “but” of verses 4 and 13 remind us our former separation from God is not the end of our stories. Verses 13-14 tell us the blood of Jesus resulted in two things: we have been brought near to the presence of God and we have been reconciled to God; the sum total being that our relationship with the Lord has been restored.

Verses 14 and 16 both describe the two groups—Jews and Gentiles—as being hostile toward one another. But in the middle, in verse 15, we read that the grace brought forth from Jesus’ death and resurrection created one new man from these two. Both Jew and Gentile are

⁴ “Luke, therefore, shows readers through his ordered narrative that Jews and Gentiles are to engage in table-fellowship together; Christianity fulfills ancestral Judaism; the gospel is for the rich and the poor; the rich are to provide for the poor; Christianity and Rome don’t have to be at odds; the Way is innocent of sedition against Caesar; both women and men are welcome in the church; and the Satanic and political forces have no power over the message of Christ.” Schreiner, 25.

united in their new identity of “In-Christ.” Verse 17 says Jesus came and preached the message of reconciliation to those who were far off—meaning Gentiles—and to those who were already near—the Jews. The same message was preached to both Jew and Gentile. The same call to believe was issued to both Jew and Gentile. The same result of the Holy Spirit’s outpouring came to both believing Jews and believing Gentiles. Verse 18 gives the explanation: *For through him [Jesus] we both [Jew and Gentile] have access to the Father by one Spirit.* It is the Father who *chooses* who to redeem; it is the Son who does the *work* of redemption; and it is the Spirit who *applies* the redemption accomplished by the Son to those chosen by the Father.

What is the conclusion, then, of this triune creation of one unified People of God from the two previously hostile groups of Jew and Gentile? Verses 19-21 says, *so then, you are no longer foreigners and aliens, but citizens with the saints and the household of God, having been built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Jesus Messiah himself being the cornerstone, in whom all of the building, having been framed together, grows into a holy temple in the Lord.*

If Jewish believers and Gentile believers can approach the same Father for a restored relationship with him, if these two are saved by the same blood of Jesus on the cross, if these two are both indwelt by the same Holy Spirit, if these two are built upon the same foundation, sharing the same Cornerstone, and if these two are built into one temple of the Holy Spirit, all of which solely by grace for both, then there is no meaningful distinction between Jew and Gentile within the Church; Jew and Gentile have lost their power as meaningful identities in the new covenant community. Jew and Gentile believers are one-and-the-same called *Christians*.

Paul’s words here in Ephesians 2 call on us to recall our old identity as a point of reference, but then to consider our new identity “in-Christ” as our place of residence. Paul writes elsewhere that our citizenship is not down here in the earthly systems, but in heaven (Phil. 3:20). Eph. 2:5-6 say God has raised us from death to life *with Christ* and has exalted us to God’s right hand *with Christ*. Who we are is not wrapped up in what is going on down here; who we are is wrapped up in the place of our eternal home. Paul teaches in this passage that as believers, our identity is unified with all other believers, regardless of what other categories may have previously defined them.

Our Culture’s Identity Crisis and the Christian Response

Identity is a massive concept in our culture today. As Christians we have an identity. When we say “I *am* a Christian,” that ought to mean something to us; it ought to be *enough* without needing modification. It is especially our western culture that finds it so crucial to categorize everyone into as many sub-categories as possible, assigning everyone their plot-points on the identity-axis, and using those to presume attitudes and behaviors; to expect outcomes, useful for advertising and politics. The Church uses the language and categories of identity our culture has created, without thinking critically about what the Christian identity really is. We do this—we treat the Christian identity with contempt—by adding to it. When we add to our Christian identity, we communicate the deficiency of the Christian identity.

I mean, I *am* white; I *am* American; I *am* a Christian. Would it be wrong to refer to myself as a “white-Christian” or an “American-Christian”? Our culture is so gender-confused right now. What’s wrong with referring to myself as a “male-Christian”? I mean, I *am* male; I *am* Christian. Isn’t it loving to provide clarity to the world so they know what pronouns to use? It is wrong to add *anything* to our “Christian” identity. In today’s culture, *any* “I am...” statement is an identity statement. If you hear people talk like this, do you notice it’s never “I am a Christian white man” or “I am a Christian-American.” It’s always the other way around. The stuff we add to the Christian identity always comes in front of Christian. We need to be careful about the language we use, not because we are afraid of the world, but because if we don’t take note of how our language is evolving we will speak unclearly about what we believe, which includes what we believe about ourselves as saved-people.

Aside from the content of the modification, just take the basic sentence structure; subject, verb, noun. Let’s take the sentence, “I am an American Christian.” Who is the subject (I)? What is the verb (am)? What is the noun (Christian)? That leaves one word left, what part of speech is the word “American” (adjective)? What do adjectives do? Adjectives modify the noun. When we say “I am an American-Christian,” whether we intend to or not, we are communicating that we are a *different* kind of Christian.

That was a fun, silly example. However, there is a phenomenon in the Church similar to this. Two men whose writings I appreciate on the topic of sexuality are Wesley Hill and Sam Allberry. Wesley Hill is a NT scholar who teaches in Holland, MI. Sam Allberry is a teaching pastor in Nashville, TN. Both are committed to the Bible’s teaching on human-sexuality and both

have foregone all romantic and sexual relationships with other men, choosing instead to glorify God with their bodies through celibacy. I have quoted both in my teaching and other messages, and both are quoted positively in our denomination’s recent sexuality report as prominent figures in the Church whose lifestyle choices ought to be told to and emulated by other believers.

These two men share a great level of continuity in their teaching. There is one notable distinction. Whereas Sam Allberry refers to himself as a “Christian who struggles with SSA,” Wesley Hill refers to himself as a “Gay-Christian.” He has stated on a number of occasions that in using the term he does not find his identity in his sexual-attractions; he says he uses the term “Gay-Christian” because he does not know of any other way to describe his temptations and struggles both honestly and succinctly. For Wesley Hill, “Gay-Christian” is a description, not an identity. I sympathize with his desire to be succinct and honest, especially because he views this the indulgence in this temptation and struggle as sinful, rather than something to take pride in like someone who says “American-Christian” may intend. Wesley Hill is a brother-in-Christ, and he is in error by using this term to describe himself. He is in error, because though he does not intend it, he is communicating that he is a *different* kind of Christian.

Even in those last two sentences, I gave Wesley Hill an identity: I called him “brother-in-Christ.” There are a variety of identities the Bible gives to believers: I am a Christian; I am a disciple of Jesus; I am a temple of the Holy Spirit; I am a child of God.⁵ There are others like this, but *all* identities that exist fall under the two categories of “in-Christ” or “anything else.” “I am a Christian” ought to be enough because “Christian” is who I am. Is this who you are? Is this identity enough?

Paul famously writes in Galatians 3:27-29 – *For those of you who were baptized into Christ have been clothed with Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek; neither slave nor free; neither male nor female since you all are one in Jesus Christ, and if you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham’s seed, heirs of the promise.* Paul is not pretending there are no rich or poor people in the Church; he is not pretending gender goes away at conversion; he’s saying there is a higher identity of new-creation and it is about belonging to Jesus as the fulfillment of God’s promise to Abraham. Do you notice how Paul writes we all *are* one in-Christ? Despite all these categories of personhood, there is *one* identity and it is “in-Christ,” and this identity is shared by

⁵ Symbolic of the new identity of baptism, for most of church history, when someone was baptized they were given a new name because our names are often so wrapped up into our identity.

all who are saved. Our world thrives on empowering you to identify yourself uniquely from everyone else, yet the Christian identity is intentionally shared across the diversities of humanity.

White, American, male—these descriptions of me did not go away at my conversion; skin color, gender, and country of origin do not change when you put your faith in Christ. But at our conversion, all these categories of personhood are relegated to (at best) secondary descriptors; in no way are these retained in any meaningful way pertaining to our new shared identity in-Christ. Although my body did not lose its maleness, I am identified by Jesus, not my masculinity; I am not a male-Christian—I am a Christian; I am not a white Christian—I am a Christian; I am not an American-Christian—I am a Christian. Is this identity enough for you?

This identity is one we share with a hundred or so people from various walks of life here in this local-congregation. This identity is one we share with a great multitude of people all around the world who right now, earlier today, later today, and some even yesterday will gather to worship, pray, and hear God’s Word. If our identity is one we share, then there is no “other” in the Church; there is no “other” within the Church because there are no different kinds of Christian. We must not make fellowship-decisions with or prejudicial character judgments of other Christians based on their skin-color, their gender, what country they are from, or what sin they may struggle with.⁶ There is no tier-system of super-Christians and then regular-Christians, and then new-Christians or the kids in children’s church. No! There is no Holy-Spirit Jr. If your child believes Jesus died for their sins and was raised from the dead, then the same Holy Spirit who raised Jesus from the dead lives in your child.

This is what Paul goes on to write in Ephesians 4:1-6. *I urge you to walk worthy of the calling you have received, with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, making every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace. There is one body and one Spirit—just as you were called in one hope at your calling—one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is above all and through all and in all.*

Our shared identity does not mean we are never allowed to disagree with one another. Our shared identity does not mean we need to dress the same or become robots; what we share is not the mundane but rather the vital. The unity Christians share in our identity ought to affect how we approach others with whom we share that identity. It ought to lead us to express our

⁶ Matt. 5, 18, and 1 Cor. 5 do teach that we ought to temporarily break fellowship with those who are persistent in unrepentant sin. I say this under the presumption that “struggle” entails a repentant attitude toward the sin-category.

shared union in Christ by mourning with those who mourn and rejoicing with those who rejoice. It ought to grow in us a desire to be with and enjoy one another, to eat with one another, to laugh with one another, to be affectionate with one another, to pray with one another, to worship together, to forgive those who have wronged us and to seek forgiveness from those whom we have wronged.

Our shared identity in Christ ought to produce in us grace for fellow-believers, rooted in the knowledge that the Church is filled with sinners. It ought to lead us to point out error in a way that corrects and edifies one another. We will disagree about things, especially on matters of wisdom and how to apply Scripture. In these moments, our shared identity in-Christ ought to direct *how* we disagree with one another; keeping in mind what Paul writes in Romans 12:10 to always strive to outdo one another in showing honor. And our shared identity ought to drive us out to the depths of our identity-confused culture to offer an identity that is unchanging, time-tested, and good.

This is the task of the Church...make disciples! Just as the Gospel of Jesus’ resurrection was preached to us and just as we believed the Gospel and submitted our lives to Jesus as our Lord, so also does our dying world need to hear, believe, and submit to the Gospel through repentance and baptism, that they may join with us and all God’s people around the world and throughout all of history at the new creation where we will lie in green pastures and rest beside quiet waters; where our lives will be restored; where we will be comforted by the protection of our good shepherd; where we will feast on the covenant banquet at the king’s table; where goodness and covenant-loyalty will pursue us for all our days; “dwell[ing] in a land where we’ll never grow old. [We’ll] dwell out there where the silence of eternity is interpreted by love... dwell in the city [built by] God [whose one foundation is Jesus Christ our Lord]; dwell in the house of the Lord forever,”⁷ together.

Amen.

⁷ S.M. Lockridge sermon, “Jesus is Lord and Christ.”