

Big Idea and Formational Question

The Christian identity removes the walls that separate us from within, and unites *all* Christians collectively into *one* People; *one* Body of Christ; *one* Temple of the Holy Spirit.

Is the Christian Identity *enough* for you?

1 Corinthians 6:18-20 and Ephesians 2:11-22 (DHT)

¹⁸ Flee sexual immorality. Every sin a man does is outside his body. But the sexually immoral sin against his own body. ¹⁹ Or do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit who is in you, whom you have from God? You are not your own, ²⁰ for you were bought with honor. Therefore, glorify God in your body. //

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.

Summary of Acts 15¹

I spoke to you in August from Acts 15 about an intense conflict; the early church struggled to explain how Gentile believers had received the Holy Spirit. Pharisees insisted these Gentiles must be circumcised and obey the Mosaic Law *before* being welcomed to the church; legalists insisted filthy sinners need to clean themselves up *before* they’re really saved. The Jew and Gentile

¹ This section is a summary of my message, “Back to the Basics: Grace Alone.”

dispute is not on the periphery of New Testament (NT) issues, but is central to it's reflections, because the Jew and Gentile dispute gets to the very heart of the Gospel. The Jew and Gentile dispute is frequently used in the NT to explain the implications of the Gospel, because the Jew and Gentile dispute gives us the greatest opportunity to understand the radical simplicity of grace. The inclusion of the Gentiles was, in fact, the fulfillment of Scripture. God promised Abraham that a singular offspring of his would be the catalyst of extending God's blessing to the ends of the earth; one Abrahamic-seed who would be the source of salvation for the Gentiles.

This promise was fulfilled when the one Abrahamic seed finally came, the person Jesus of Nazareth. Circumcision, then, is no longer a necessary initiatory rite into the covenant community. In Col. 2, Paul recalls that it's more important to circumcise one's heart than any other body part; and through baptism, our hearts are circumcised. *Prior* to the arrival of Jesus, circumcision was a sign of the promise still to come, and *after* the arrival of Jesus, baptism remains a sign that the promise was fulfilled. Baptism functions as an initiatory rite into the community just like circumcision had, but baptism is different in that it is commanded of all ethnicities, done to both genders, and remembers a past fulfillment rather than holding out hope for something still to come. What changed was that the content of the promise was actualized in Jesus, whose life, death, resurrection, and exaltation brings 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.

These legalistic Pharisees made their case, but their understanding of God's Word was wrong, for circumcision pointed ahead to the Messiah, and a sign pointing ahead to the Messiah was no longer needed once Messiah had come. Peter, Paul, and Barnabas experienced Gentiles who received the Holy Spirit without becoming Jewish first, and this outpouring of the Spirit confirmed the Scriptures. At the Jerusalem Council, the Holy Spirit made clear that *all people* receive salvation the exact same way: We are saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus the same way they are (11), because God's plan was and remains to extend the blessings of salvation to the ends of the earth. So, the apostles wrote a letter confirming that salvation is by the radical simplicity of grace alone, and that *holiness* is the required lifestyle of all who receive that grace.

Brief Exposition of Ephesians 2

After the Jerusalem Council, Paul wrote to Gentile believers in Ephesus. Paul recounts in Eph. 2 the common salvation story of all believers. Verse 3 says *we were children of wrath, by*

nature, just as they were. Verse 5 says: *You are saved by grace!* Verses 8-9 say: *For you are saved by grace through faith, and this [faith] is not of yourselves; [this faith of yours] is the gift of God—not from works of which anyone may boast.* How does Paul explain the radical simplicity of God’s grace? Paul immediately goes to the contrast between circumcision vs. uncircumcision, code words for Jew and Gentile. Verses 11-12 correspond to 1-3 in that Paul calls his Gentile audience to remember when they weren’t saved. Your past is a place of reference but not a place of residence, for the glorious ‘but’ of 4 and 13 remind us that *separation* from God was not the end of our story. Any testimony lacking the ‘but’ of salvation isn’t a testimony of Gospel transformation. Our pasts don’t disappear when we come to Christ; but they *do* lose their enslaving power, for our separation from God was abolished by the blood of Jesus.

Verses 14 and 16 both describe the two groups—Jews and Gentiles—as being hostile toward one another. But in the middle, in 15, we read that Jesus’ death and resurrection created one new man from the two. Both Jew and Gentile are united in their new identity in Christ. Verse 17 says Jesus came and preached the message of reconciliation to those who were far off—the Gentiles—and to those who were near—the Jews. The *same* message was preached to both Jew and Gentile. The *same* call to believe the Gospel is issued to both Jew and Gentile. The Holy Spirit poured out on *both* believing Jews and believing Gentiles. As 18 explains, *through Jesus both Jew and Gentile have access to the Father by one Spirit.*

It’s the Father who *chooses* who is redeemed; it’s Jesus the Son who *achieves* redemption; and it’s the Holy Spirit who *applies* the Son’s redemption to those chosen by the Father. What’s the conclusion, then, of this triune creation of one unified People from the two previously hostile groups? Verses 19-21 say, *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... Jesus Messiah himself being the cornerstone, in whom all of the building, having been framed together, grows into one 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 indwelt by the *same* Holy Spirit, and if these two are built upon the *same* foundation, sharing the *same* Cornerstone, *both* of which by grace alone, then there’s no meaningful distinction between Jew and Gentile within the Church; ‘Jew’ and ‘Gentile’ have lost their power as meaningful identities in the Church. Jew and Gentile believers are simply called *Christians*. Is the Christian identity *enough* for you?

Paul’s words call 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. Verses 5-6 say God has raised us from death to life *with Christ* and has exalted us to God’s right hand *with Christ*. Similar to 19, Paul writes in Phil. 3:20 that our citizenship is not down here on earth, but is in heaven with Christ. Who we are isn’t wrapped up in what’s going on down here; who we are is wrapped up in the place of our eternal home.² Paul teaches that as believers, *the way* we are united to one another is our *identity*. Regardless of what categories may have previously defined us or even continue to describe us, all believers have one new, *unified identity*. Is the Christian identity *enough* for you?

Our Culture’s Identity Crisis and the Christian Response

The worldview of our day has thrust our culture into an identity crisis; one that requires the forsaking of truth. There’s no ‘my truth’ vs. ‘your truth;’ there is only ‘*the truth*’ or ‘falsehood.’ Someone can really think they are right about something, yet still be wrong; they can have all the passion, but still be in error. Truth is losing its muster; truth is neither sought nor valued, postmodernly subjected to the feelings of identity politics. A second presupposition is that you’re either an *oppressor* or *oppressed*.³ If you’re not oppressed in some way, then you’re an oppressor—those are the only choices. But nobody wants to be an oppressor, so rather than work through our issues with a trusted friend or counselor, our culture manufactures marginalization, because they thirst for the protections normally found in the loving relationships their intolerant religion of tolerance forbids them from having. A third presupposition is the incessant need, therefore, to put up walls of hostility to separate from anyone who’s different from us in any sort of way; only those who think like me can be on my side of the wall, that way nobody questions or pushes back against my thoughts, words, or deeds. And a fourth presupposition is the virtue of autonomy. ‘I am my own,’ says our culture. ‘I am my own, as determined by me, and I have determined to be oppressed; therefore, I need protection from *them*, whoever *them* may be; and if you don’t protect me then you’re aiding and abetting my oppressor; in fact, you *are* my oppressor, and a bigoted one at that. I am my own, and *nobody* can tell me otherwise.’

Identity is a driving force in our culture today. Christians *have* an identity. When we say “I *am* a Christian,” that ought to mean something to us; it ought to be *enough* without needing

² For more, see my message, “Is God’s Home Where Your Heart Is?”

³ These categories come from what is academically called Critical Theory, popularly applied to race and gender.

modification. Is the Christian identity *enough* for you? Our culture 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 behaviors, to expect outcomes, and commercialize that data to the highest bidder. The Church regrettably uses our culture’s language of identity, without thinking about what the Christian identity means. We treat the Christian identity with contempt by throwing excrement on it. When we add to our Christian identity, we communicate the *deficiency* of the Christian identity; in effect that Christ himself is not enough.

I mean, I *am* white; I *am* American; I *am* a Christian. What’s wrong with calling myself 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... I contend that it’s wrong to add *anything* to our Christian identity. In today’s culture, *any* ‘I am...’ statement is an identity statement. When 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 gets priority. We need to be careful about the language we use, or we’ll inadvertently speak unclearly about what we believe about ourselves as saved people.

Let’s just take the basic sentence structure; subject, verb, noun. Let’s take the sentence, ‘I am an American Christian.’ What’s the subject (I)? What’s the verb (am)? What’s 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 it or not, we are communicating that we are a *different* kind of Christian. ‘I am an American Christian’ communicates that Christ is welcome to transform my life, except my Americanness; my patriotism is untouchable. We are communicating that within the global body of believers there are ‘American’ Christians and ‘other’ Christians. But this is in direct opposition to what Paul writes in Eph. 2. There’s no ‘other’ *within* the Christian community. The only ‘other’ that exists are those separated from God. But once reconciled to God, all previous ‘others’ are united under the *one* Christian identity; *one* body of Christ; *one* temple of the Holy Spirit. This country is a blessing to live in and our passports may say we’re citizens of the USA, but our ultimate pledge of allegiance is to Christ in heaven; we must live now in light of *that* eternal reality.

There’s a growing phenomenon in the Church similar to this pertaining to sexual identity. So, let’s consider this idea from that angle. Two men whose writings on the topic of sexuality have been helpful to me are Wesley Hill and Sam Allberry. Both are committed to the Bible’s teaching

on human-sexuality. Both have forsaken sexual relationships with other men, choosing instead to glorify God with their bodies through celibacy. These two are exemplary figures in the Church. For those of you who also experience same-sex attraction, or for those of you who love and care for someone who experiences same-sex attraction, I commend the writings of Wesley Hill and Sam Allberry.⁴

The teachings of Sam Allberry and Wesley Hill are almost identical, but there’s one notable distinction. Whereas Allberry refers to himself as a ‘Christian who experiences SSA,’ Hill refers to himself as a ‘Gay Christian.’ He’s stated on a number of occasions that in using the term he doesn’t find his identity in his sexuality; he uses the term ‘Gay Christian’ because he doesn’t know another way to describe his temptations both honestly and succinctly. For Hill, ‘Gay Christian’ is a *description*, not an identity. I sympathize with his desire to be honest and succinct, especially since he rightly views the indulgence of temptation as sinful. Wesley Hill is a brother-in-Christ, but he’s in error for using this term to describe himself, because though he doesn’t intend it, he’s communicating that he’s a *different* kind of Christian.

One of the reasons I have devoted so much of my theological education to the topic of sexuality is because periodically over the past decade, and increasingly over the past three years, the Spirit has impressed upon my heart that revival is coming to the gay community; a revival marked by repentance of sin, the forsaking of self, and bold devotion to Jesus. I argue elsewhere that when the Bible teaches that our *hearts* need to be transformed, ‘heart’ refers to our worldview and identity.⁵ It’s often noted that the underlying sin of homosexuality is not sexual or pride, but a case of misplaced identity. All we do flows from our heart; from our worldview and identity. 21% of Gen-Z identify as gay.⁶ I doubt there’s anyone here who doesn’t know someone in the gay community—they need to hear the Gospel too. When we call the gay community to renounce their identity and turn from sin to be reconciled to God, are we providing them a realistic alternative? Are we just telling them the bad news of their sin, or are we in the *same breath* giving them also the good news of grace, forgiveness, and freedom? Are we calling them to leave a community who deeply cares for them like family to come to a community who makes them feel like an ‘other’ because we sin differently than you?⁷ Are we calling them to leave the LGB identity for an identity

⁴ For a female perspective, I also commend the writings of Jackie Hill-Perry, Rosaria Butterfield, and Rachel Gilson.

⁵ An in-progress manuscript for a commentary about the Gospel based on my original hymn, “Come, My Friends.”

⁶ <https://www.axios.com/2022/02/17/lgbtq-generation-z-gallup>

⁷ I am lumping myself in with the gay community, of which I was once part.

we ourselves don't live out? When we tell them 'I'm a Christian,' but we go pursue the unholy things unbelievers do, though we don't intend it, we communicate that they don't have to fully surrender their life to Jesus. If we don't live out the Christian identity, what impact will our actions have on *any* unbeliever we invite to the faith?

Scripture tells us everyone, everywhere must bow in total submission to Jesus as Lord, which means we hand over the autonomy of our whole life to Jesus as our master. Christian don't get to use our body however we want. 'My body, my choice' is antithetical to the Gospel. The Christian cannot say 'I am my own.' Rather, we say "I am *not* my own; for I *belong* body and soul to my Lord and Savior Jesus Christ."⁸ Scripture tells us everyone, everywhere must believe in their heart that Jesus was raised from the dead to be forgiven of their sins and reconciled to God. Have you repented of your sins? Have you fully surrendered your life to Jesus? Do you believe in his death and resurrection, by which God's love was showcased for all the world to see? Have you done this? If so, then the Spirit has come to live *in* you, changing your earthly frame into a place where heaven and earth meet; transforming you into a temple of the living God. And if your body is a temple, then this means the Spirit has *disrupted* your worldly priorities, making the pursuit of *holiness* your new lifestyle. When the Spirit enters your life, the Spirit transforms who you are *and what you do*, shaping and preparing you for eternity to come. "Oh, but Daniel; but Veronica; but Adam; but Val; but John; but Laura, my desires are too strong; I can't help myself!" Yes you can; they're strong, but not *too* strong. When the Spirit enters your life, the Spirit transforms you by changing your *will* so that you *can* obey and endure. Is there grace in times of weakness for the repentant? Of course! But grace does not mean permission. In times of weakness when the lusts of the flesh *seem* to be too strong, we can *only* have victory if and when we rely on the Spirit who was given to the Church *for that purpose*.

In our identity obsessed culture, the Church needs to be the beacon for the prioritization and value of truth. The Church needs to be the beacon for a vision of the body that selflessly gives life, rather than one that selfishly breeds death. The Church needs to be the beacon for what it means to have an identity that is neither oppressor, and no longer oppressed, but *free*. Now, the Bible gives believers a variety of identities: I am a Christian; I am a disciple of Jesus; I am a temple of the Holy Spirit; I am a child of God. In baptism we receive a new identity—so much so that for most of Church history when someone was baptized, they were given a new name because our

⁸ From Heidelberg Catechism Q&A #1; cf. "I Am Not My Own," a song by Skye Peterson and Ben Chive, 2022.

names are so wrapped up with our identity. But these Scriptural identities, and all identities that exist fall under two broad categories: you’re either in Christ or separated from God. ‘In Christ’ ought to be enough because ‘in Christ’ is who I am. Is the Christian identity *enough* for you?

Paul writes in Colossians: *There is neither Greek nor Jew, circumcised nor uncircumcised, barbarian nor Scythian, slave nor free; for Christ is in all.* Paul writes in Galatians: *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 heirs of the Abrahamic promise.* Paul’s not pretending there’s no such thing as ethnicity in the Church; he’s not pretending gender goes away at conversion; he’s saying there’s a higher identity and it’s about *belonging* to Jesus. Paul writes that there is *one* identity for believers and this identity ‘in Christ’ is shared by *all* believers. Our world thrives on empowering you to identify yourself as uniquely as possible; yet the Christian identity is shared across the beautiful diversity of humanity; individualism has no place in the Church. These categories do not change at conversion, but they are relegated to (at best) secondary descriptors.⁹ In no way are these retained in the sense of defining us. Although my body did not lose these descriptors, I’m identified by Jesus plus nothing. I’m not a white Christian; I’m a Christian. I’m not an American Christian; I’m a Christian. I’m not a male Christian; I’m a Christian. *I’m not a gay Christian; I’m a Christian.* Is the Christian identity *enough* for you?

The Christian identity is shared with several dozen people in this community. This identity is also shared with a great multitude of people all around the world who consistently gather to worship, pray, read and hear God’s Word, and enjoy one another’s company over meals. If our identity is something shared with one another, then there’s no ‘other’ *within* the Church. There’s no ‘other’ *within* the Church because there are no *different* kinds of Christians. We must not make fellowship decisions with, or prejudicial character judgments of other Christians based on their skin color, country of origin, gender, or what sin they may struggle with.¹⁰ There’s no tier system of super Christians, regular Christians, and new Christians. If you’ve put your faith in the resurrection of Jesus and submitted to him as your Lord, then the *same* Spirit who raised Jesus from the dead lives in you *and* every other believer.

⁹ Rev. 7:9-10, among others, tells us that nation, tribe, people, and language distinctions *apparently remain* to some extent, though all will sing with one voice as one great multitude, which is why I call them ‘secondary descriptors.’

¹⁰ There is a presumption that ‘struggle’ includes a *repentant attitude* toward the sin struggled with. Matt. 5; 18; and 1 Cor. 5 *do* teach that we ought to break fellowship with those who are persistent in *unrepentant* sin.

Paul uses the Jew and Gentile dispute to teach us that there’s no ‘other’ *within* the Church. Paul uses the imagery of a demolished wall to teach that all Christians have the *same* identity and *same* calling as everyone else who is a Christian. The walls we put up that prevent honest, vulnerable, and safe fellowship with one another—these walls have no place in the Church because of our unified identity. Paul writes later in Ephesians: *I urge you to walk worthy of your calling...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 unified identity doesn’t mean we must dress the same or become robots; what we share is the vital, not the mundane. The unified identity Christians have ought to affect how we approach others with whom we share this identity. We express our unified identity in Christ by mourning with those who mourn, and rejoicing with those who rejoice. We ought to desire to be with and enjoy one another, to understand each other, to eat together, to laugh together, to be affectionate with one another, to be family with one another, to pray together, to worship together, to forgive those who have wronged us, and to seek forgiveness from those we’ve wronged. Our unified 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 ways that correct and edify our fellow identity sharers. Our unified identity doesn’t mean we’re never allowed to disagree with one another. We’ll disagree about things, especially on matters of wisdom or how to apply Scripture. In these moments, our unified identity in Christ ought to direct *how* we disagree with one another, namely in ways marked by peace, truth, and love.

Our unified identity also ought to drive us to the depths of our identity confused culture to offer an identity that is unchanging, time tested, and thoroughly good. Just as the Gospel of the death and resurrection of Jesus was preached to us, and just as we believed the Gospel and submitted our lives to Jesus as Lord, so also does our dying, separated world need to hear, believe, and submit to the Gospel—so that they may join us and all God’s people around the world and throughout history to sing with *one* glad, harmonious voice of the grace and glory of God. Amen?

Let’s pray—Heavenly Father, we thank you for bridging the chasm that lay between us. Unite your Church around the truth of your Word. Help us express our unity with brotherly and sisterly love. Give us tender hearts so we may fortify, encourage, live in joyful harmony, and work with one mind to make known the reconciliation of Jesus, in whose name we pray, amen.