

Building on the facts of the nature of the Christ, the fullness of Godness dwelling bodily, who is the authority over all powers and authorities, the visible and the invisible, etc., Paul immediately draws upon the implications *for us* of such a union with *that* one. Because “in Him” we, too, have already been made full, given everything which we need for life and godliness, for living the fullness of what a human life is supposed to be.

Now, remember, that our union with Jesus, our “in Him”, is primarily positional, a legal union with an underlying relational reality. It is a representative union whereby God’s Son mediates for the people whom He represents.

Does that make sense? The reason that I want to distinguish the positional union here, one of representation, is because some today want to mix mysticism into this union and confuse the identity of the Christ with the identity of His people, as if they are existentially one. That is an incorrect understanding of this union. We are distinct persons, we don’t have a ‘hive mind’ or anything like that. We can still neglect Jesus, we can still ignore Him, the present reality of sin within us doesn’t somehow taint Him, etc.

Surely there are spiritual realities of how God relates to us and how He changes us which are very mysterious, how He opens the eyes of our hearts to see eternal truth and to believe it (being born again), but that is not what is meant by Paul when he speaks of us as “in Christ”. **The oneness which Paul is elaborating thus far in Colossians is the oneness of representation based upon relationship.** Christ Jesus is our Lord. We are His people.

This representative relationship, however, is far more intimate than a mere priest or lawyer. The Scripture uses metaphors like brotherhood and marriage to show that what we gain from being united to Jesus is far more than mere forgiveness. It is not less than forgiveness, but it much, much more. We gain a new identity in the family of God with all the *honor* that this implies. We were a people who belonged to the domain of darkness, but He has now transferred us into a new kingdom, the kingdom of this Son whom he loves. We're with Him, and He's with us.

Thus, the metaphor of circumcision is certainly apropos in this context of "fullness", because the promise which God gave to Abraham, and sealed with the sign of circumcision, is the promise that God would make a people who belong to Him as a family with an inheritance of honor, a place of belonging and significance for a people small and insignificant in the world.

The background of circumcision begins in Genesis 17, when it was instituted in God's history with His people. He commanded Abraham to be circumcised as a sign of His covenant promise, which gives us the referent which Paul is drawing upon to the Colossians, that which is fulfilled in the person and work of Jesus Christ as the signatory of the ultimate covenant between God and Man.

When Abram was ninety-nine years old the LORD appeared to Abram and said to him, "I am God Almighty; walk before me, and be blameless, ² that I may make my covenant between me and you, and may multiply you greatly." ³ Then Abram fell on his face. And God said to him, ⁴ "Behold, my covenant is with you, and you shall be the father of a multitude of nations. ⁵ No longer shall your name be called Abram, but your name shall be Abraham, for I have made you the father of

a multitude of nations. ⁶ I will make you exceedingly fruitful, and I will make you into nations, and kings shall come from you. ⁷ And I will establish my covenant between me and you and your offspring after you throughout their generations for an everlasting covenant, to be God to you and to your offspring after you. ⁸ And I will give to you and to your offspring after you the land of your wanderings, all the land of Canaan, for an everlasting possession, and I will be their God." ⁹ And God said to Abraham, "As for you, you shall keep my covenant, you and your offspring after you throughout their generations. ¹⁰ This is my covenant, which you shall keep, between me and you and your offspring after you: Every male among you shall be circumcised. ¹¹ You shall be circumcised in the flesh of your foreskins, and it shall be a sign of the covenant between me and you. ¹² He who is eight days old among you shall be circumcised. Every male throughout your generations, whether born in your house or bought with your money from any foreigner who is not of your offspring, ¹³ both he who is born in your house and he who is bought with your money, shall surely be circumcised. So shall my covenant be in your flesh an everlasting covenant. ¹⁴ Any uncircumcised male who is not circumcised in the flesh of his foreskin shall be cut off from his people; he has broken my covenant." (Gen. 17:1-14)

What we see in this origin story of redemptive history is that circumcision was a sign of the covenant that God made to Abraham when He graciously and sovereignly chose for Himself a people from among all the peoples of the world through whom He would do His work of redemption. Therefore, circumcision is primarily a sign of distinction. He would be their God and they would be His people. He would multiply the nations in

him and unite many through his offspring. He would give them a land in which to belong. And there it is. Belong. That is the concept to which the covenant speaks: you will belong to God.

Circumcision, then, I would argue, is a sign of God's covenant of belonging, the promised rest for the soul, the cease from striving, and the resonant joy which comes from belonging to the Almighty One, the Maker, the infinite and holy one.

And it was to be a mark in the very flesh, a reminder to the bearer of the mark of the covenant of God's grace and the importance of gratefully and humbly walking as one who belongs to God.

However, what is also clear from Israel's redemptive history is that the physical marks of circumcision soon became the assumed cause of God's choice rather than the sign of God's gracious choice. Therefore, much of the false teaching in the early church was based upon this erroneous view of the physical mark of circumcision as a necessary component of God's grace, rather than simply a sign or seal of God's covenant. This wasn't new to the times of Jesus, of course. It had been the case throughout the history of Abraham's children, and is directly addressed by the LORD numerous times throughout His interactions with them, recorded in the books of the Old Testament.

For example, in the Torah, the books of both Leviticus and Deuteronomy refer to the LORD's disobedient people as those who are circumcised in the flesh, but not in the heart. **Leviticus 26:40-42 reads, "However, when they confess their iniquity and their ancestors' iniquity which they committed by trespassing against me, by which they also walked in hostility against me (and I myself will walk in hostility against them and**

bring them into the land of their enemies), and then their uncircumcised hearts become humbled and thus answer for their iniquity, I will remember my covenant with Jacob and also my covenant with Isaac and also my covenant with Abraham,⁶⁷ and I will remember the land.”

Deuteronomy 10:14-16 reads, “Behold, to the LORD your God belong heaven and the heaven of heavens, the earth with all that is in it. Yet the LORD set his heart in love on your fathers and chose their offspring after them, you above all peoples, as you are this day. Circumcise therefore the foreskin of your heart, and stop being so stubborn!”

Both Jeremiah and Ezekiel write of the need for a circumcised heart, a heart marked by the sign of dependent faith in the LORD, as the underlying reality to which the physical sign was to point, and the LORD specifically promises such a fulfillment to the people through Moses:

“And the LORD your God will circumcise your heart and the heart of your offspring, so that you will love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul, that you may live.” (Deuteronomy 30:6)

So what Paul does is to show the fulfillment of this promise as God cleanses the hearts of His restored people, forgives their sins, removes the accusations against them, and triumphs over those things which enslaved them, all through the death and resurrection of His Son, bringing back the concept of circumcision to its original referent: the promise of God to make a people for Himself. And the way which Paul connects these things is amazing.

First, he states that “in Him also, you were circumcised.” **That is, all who have repented and entrusted themselves to Jesus have been marked out as belonging to God, not by a physical mark, but by a circumcision “made without hands.”** That is, it is not man-made or performed by man. It is a spiritual mark, a spiritual work, an invisible sign of God’s covenant belonging. And Paul has to announce it, because it is unseen on the body. And because it is not made by human hands, but by God’s hands, it is unmistakably certain as a sign of the promise. It is as certain as Jesus’ death and resurrection.

Now here’s where it the metaphor gets odd. Circumcision was the removal of a piece of skin, which was cast off, thrown away as worthless, a symbol of the removal of sin and self-dependence. **But what Paul says was cast off in this circumcision of yours, was Christ!** It was His body of flesh which was cut off and cast aside as worthless, so that you would be included and would *rightly* belong. Do you see this?! Christ was cut off so that you might be brought in, finally and ultimately gaining from His exclusion.

As the author of the book of Hebrews wrote, “He suffered outside the gates,” outside the place of belonging and comfort and blessing. He suffered the wrath and exclusion of God, being treated as though He did not belong in the Father’s holy presence, even though He had done all things perfectly. That is His union with us. We deserved to be cut off, but He was cut off in our place, so that we would bear His mark of belonging, His blessings of God’s promise to the obedient, even though we were not obedient.

Now, you may be wondering how I interpreted “body of flesh” here. Some have attempted to interpret this phrase as referring to our own hearts, our own desires to sin, and have therefore tried to reconcile what it means that it was cut off. Some have even

erroneously interpreted as something which we are to presently do, even though it is clearly a past-tense verb, something which has already been done. Confusion has resulted because of a lack of looking at the immediate context. The “body of flesh” is referring to Jesus’ own body, which was cast off, thrown away, a euphemism for His death within the metaphor of circumcision.

I reach this conclusion because the only other time this phrase is used is back in 1:22, where it clearly refers to the physical body of Jesus. “He has now reconciled you in His body of flesh, in order to present you holy blameless and beyond reproach...” And do you see the parallel to Genesis 17? “You shall walk before me and thus be blameless...”? Jesus accomplishes this reconciliation, through his body of flesh, for those who come to Him by faith. That is the good news!

It also shows us the *kind, or quality*, of faith which Paul refers to in this passage, because the faith mentioned here is not merely a profession of belief in Jesus, but that which pursues the purposes for which Christ has united Himself to us, for which He became cast off that we might be brought in. That is, “to present us holy, blameless, and beyond reproach before God.” Therefore, our inclusion in Christ is not merely a sharing in his benefits, but also, then, in His purposes. We strive for holiness as a result of our union with Him. We strive for purity because that is the purpose of the circumcision of Christ. In fact, one could argue that the proof of God’s paternity of His people is their passion for purity. It is not perfection which marks His people, but a passion for purity, a warfare against wickedness, a hounding for holiness.

Yet, says Paul, you have already been marked with the sign of your belonging to God, not because you cast anything off, but because Jesus, to whom you are bound together with by faith, was cast off for you.

Do you struggle with wondering where you belong? Do you become anxious because you don't seem to fit this group or that group, or even more intensely, you don't think that you fit God's expectations of a son or of a daughter. My dear friends...if you are entrusting yourself to Jesus, you already bear the mark of the family. You do belong here. Not because of your perfection or your honorable strength, but because of His. All the shame and embarrassment and unworthiness which you feel has already been dealt with by Christ. All that is left is honor and the hope of glory for you in Him.

Now consider some of the implications of this belonging. It means that your relationship with Christ and his Church supersedes all other national identities, ethnic identities, and economic identities. You are Christian brothers before you are blue-collar brothers. You are Christian sisters before you are American citizens. You are mutually needy, mutually rescued, and equal siblings in the household of God. You are all circumcised sons, sharers in all the promises of God in Christ. As Paul told the Corinthians, "All the promises of God find their 'yes' in Him, which is why we utter our 'Amen' to God for His glory." You are not guests in the household of God, but you, being circumcised, are heirs, children, and inheritors of all God's promises. There is no distinction between Jew and Gentile, slave or free, male or female. While the physical rite of circumcision was only for males, the circumcision of Christ is given to all who trust in Him, male or female, and all receive the same covenant blessings. Racism, sexism, classism have no place in the Church of Jesus Christ because they are

diametrically opposed to the very foundation of how we are included and why we belong. We who submit ourselves to Jesus, all and only, belong to God because Christ was cut off for us, and we all receive the same mark of belonging because He was marked off for destruction on our behalf.

This is what baptism signifies, too, as Paul moves from the metaphor of circumcision and belonging to the metaphor of death and resurrection symbolized in baptism.

Baptism symbolizes our union with Jesus. Your baptism is a sign of your immersion into His death. You were buried with Him. Think about this! When He was buried in the ground, paying the penalty of sin, cast off and thrown away and treated as an enemy of God, bearing the curse with which God cursed the world because of sin...you were buried with Him. When He was cast out in shame, so were you.

What this means is that the consequences of sin which were promised by God and explained in the Law of God...have been paid. *And you have already paid them* when Christ died. When He died, you died. When he paid for sins, you paid for sins. When God had called your sins to account, you wrote the check and Jesus co-signed it, and God accepted it on the basis of His resources.

How do we know that God accepted this circumcision, this ‘casting off’ of his body of flesh? Because He was raised from the dead by God’s own power...and you were raised up with Him! You are not only dead, but you are alive to God, to walk in blamelessness and holiness before Him, to belong to Him in the radiant rest of the glory and love of God, just as Jesus does. If Jesus belongs to the Father...so do you. If Jesus enjoys the rest of God’s pleasure in Him...so do you who are in Him. As He is alive, honored and beloved and delighted in by God, then so are you!

And how are we in Him? How are we united to His death and resurrection? How do we gain from His being cut off so that we are brought in to this place of belonging to God? “through faith in the powerful God” You are united to Christ Jesus by faith alone, not by physical rites of circumcision or baptism, which are merely outward signs of the spiritual reality of being united to Him. You are united to Him by faith alone who has the power to unite you, to answer for you, to raise you up with Him to the newness of life, holiness, and blamelessness.

And this faith is a humble faith, which James refers to as “faith which works” because it believes in the God who is powerful, not the God who is impotent or uninterested. Jean Calvin said succinctly in his momentous work, *The Institutes of the Christian Religion*, “A man cannot apply himself seriously to repentance without knowing himself to belong to God.” (3.3.2) Isn’t that interesting? The more that you believe that you belong to God through Christ Jesus, the more that repentance and the pursuit of holiness becomes to your life. In fact, in the words of David Martyn-Lloyd Jones, **“There is nothing that is so calculated to promote holiness as the realization that we are heirs of God and joint-heirs with Christ, that our destiny is certain and secure, that nothing can prevent it. Realizing that, we purify ourselves even as He is pure, and we feel that there is no time to waste. That is the way to live the Christian life! Do not turn it into a law, but realize that you have received the Holy Spirit. Then, work out this theme. Your Father is watching over you. He is looking after you – yes, let me use scriptural language – He is jealous concerning you because you belong to Him. You belong to Christ, you are His brother. The Holy Spirit is dwelling in your very body and you are destined for glory.”** (*Spiritual Depression: Its Causes and Cure*)

Therefore, what motivates us to fight against sin, to not live in it or find our life by it, but to pursue the holiness which glorifies God and honors Christ our brother, begins with and is motivated by the glorious grace of God in calling us His own, by His own work, by uniting us to the persona and performance of Christ Jesus the Lord. It is grace which generates godliness, not the law. The law reveals the need and shows the goal, but only grace can get you there. Therefore, we repent fearlessly and joyfully, and we strive with the certainty that the battle will be won because we have already died and been raised with Christ, and as surely as He passed through the heavens to represent us before the Father, so, too, shall we pass through the heavens to join Him there in the place which He is preparing because we belong to the Father just as He belongs to the Father, for the marks which He bears as the sign of the covenant are cut deeply into His hands, feet, and side, in the bold relief of eternity.

These things are true, even though you were dead in your trespasses and uncircumcision of your own flesh. That is, you once did not belong to God because you belonged to sin. You chose to embrace sin rather than Christ. That's the "live in sin" or "continue in sin" which Gary told us about last week. We embraced it and did not wage war against it. You chose sides with the Devil, and were held captive by him to do his will. And you chose this, because you would have rather had the promises of sin than submit to the authority of God. We all did. We were all dead through such rebellious foolishness.

Yet, though you were dead in such futility, God made you alive together with Christ by forgiving you all your trespasses. Do you see that? God did it! God made you live! He did so by forgiving your sins. You were forgiven because Christ Jesus was not. You

were passed over because He was taken by the Angel of Death. You were shown mercy and granted life because He was raised up by God. That is the gospel of Jesus Christ: you have a representative of infinite quality and capability, Jesus the Son of God, who answers for your sins so that you are forgiven.

And not only are you forgiven, but God made you alive by wiping out the record of all your debts, which was against you, in every particular way and every minutiae of your errors, both those you stumbled into through ignorance and those you marched into through obstinate defiance, He has taken them all way by nailing them to the cross.

Wow! It is so clear, isn't it?

While all the previous verbs are punctiliar, which means that they happened once at a certain point in time, but this word "carried away" is in a form which emphasizes the present significance of that event which has already happened. It loudly proclaims that God has completely and utterly removed our record of failure from our midst, and it remains removed from our midst. The accusations which stood against you are GONE in Christ Jesus! It's not as if you aren't adding to those accusations by your present stumbles and weaknesses and even rebellion at times, but rather that God has already righted the scales of justice weighted with those accusations *by nailing them through the body of the flesh of His Son and into the roughened beams of a Roman execution instrument: the cross.*

Finally, not only did He remove the record of debt, but by the same cross He humiliated all the powers and authorities which may make an appeal to those debts as the means of enslaving you to them. He has disarmed their weapons, because the primary weapon

of the enemy of God is not some Hollywood version of Rosemary's baby, or some spiritual force of darkness who throws tables around or speaks in throaty tones around a séance table. The weapon which Satan wields against Christians is the weapon of accusation. He slanders. He accuses you, and if he can convince you that God is against you because of your sins, you flee from God rather than run to Him. Do you see this? No power has any authority over you which Christ does not ordain.

If so, in those moments of accusation, when the enemy brings up your sins to you, you can answer according to this reality of your union with Christ. The enemy has no arms. The roaring lion who prowls about seeking someone to devour has no teeth and no claws, for God has disarmed him, taking away that weapon of accusation by nailing it to the cross. You have already died. What can the Accuser demand of you? The price which he brings up has already been paid!

In this way God leads these "rulers and authorities" as those defeated and disarmed, beaten down and robbed of their weapons. He walks in triumph over them, and because you are united to Him, then you do, too. Therefore, you can agree with the accusations and yet not agree with the outcome which they desire, which is your condemnation and the spiritual depression which comes with such a belief. Rather, you can believe that the accusation is true, *but that it has been nailed to the cross and carried away by God Himself through Christ.* You do not have to act as if you have not died, but you can walk as those who have already died, offering up your bodies to God as an offering of gratitude, not an offering of atonement. We love Him because He has first loved us! That is the root which bears the fruit of righteousness, life, peace, and joy according to the Spirit of God, who is waging war against the fleshly desire to keep

earning our peace, performing for our righteousness, and ceaselessly striving to avoid a death which we have already died with Christ.

I love how Martin Luther answered the rulers and authorities when they accused him of sin, which he knew to be true accusations. He wrote in his commentary on Galatians 1:4, “When the devil accuses us and says, ‘You are a sinner and therefore damned,’ we should answer, ‘Because you say I am a sinner, I will be righteous and saved.’ ‘No,’ says the devil, ‘you will be damned.’ And I reply, ‘No, for I fly to Christ, who gave himself for my sins. Satan, you will not prevail against me when you try to terrify me by setting forth the greatness of my sins and try to bring me into heaviness, distrust, despair, hatred, contempt and blasphemy against God. On the contrary, when you say I am a sinner, you give me armor and weapons against yourself, so that with your own sword I may cut your throat and tread you under my feet, for Christ died for sinners. . . . As often as you object that I am a sinner, so often you remind me of the benefit of Christ my Redeemer, on whose shoulders, and not on mine, lie all my sins. So when you say I am a sinner, you do not terrify me but comfort me immeasurably.’”

So, let anyone proclaim, “You are an orphan and a miserable, poor, wretch who deserves to be condemned.” And let us reply, “You are right in saying that I am a sinner, that in my war against sin, I have not yet escaped its desires. What of it?! I was once alienated from God and from His people, but I have already died when Christ, my brother, died. I have been raised up holy, blameless, and beyond reproach because Christ, my brother, was excluded for me. There is no obstacle between God and me now. I am His, and He is mine. I belong in His love because God has fit me for this place in His Son. As he is received and belongs, so do I. The banner over my house is

‘One beloved by God.’ So, do your worst, Accuser. You have no legs to stand on, because God, my God, has triumphed over my sins, and over you, and I belong to Him because of Christ Jesus my Lord.”