



Roanoke, Virginia
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“The True Mark of Christian Identity”

Ezekiel 20:19-20, I Peter 3:18-22

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Ezekiel 20:19-20

¹⁹ I the LORD am your God; follow my statutes, and be careful to observe my ordinances, ²⁰ and hallow my sabbaths that they may be a sign between me and you, so that you may know that I the LORD am your God.

I Peter 3:18-22

¹⁸ For Christ also suffered for sins once for all, the righteous for the unrighteous, in order to bring you to God. He was put to death in the flesh, but made alive in the spirit, ¹⁹ in which also he went and made a proclamation to the spirits in prison, ²⁰ who in former times did not obey, when God waited patiently in the days of Noah, during the building of the ark, in which a few, that is, eight persons, were saved through water. ²¹ And baptism, which this prefigured, now saves you—not as a removal of dirt from the body, but as an appeal to God for a good conscience, through the resurrection of Jesus Christ, ²² who has gone into heaven and is at the right hand of God, with angels, authorities, and powers made subject to him.

Here is a bit of Church History you don't hear much. In the earliest Christian Church, there were many, including disciples of Jesus, who thought that every Christian male ought to be circumcised. Certainly Peter, James and John were devout in their commitment to follow in the way of Jesus, but they also thought that meant being devout in the ways of their ancestors. Circumcision had been an unquestioned expression of Jewishness for too many centuries to count.



I bet it is no surprise to you, but this expectation of circumcision was not something *Gentile* followers of Jesus accepted. Of course, to state the obvious, the physical discomfort was an objection. But so also was the idea that such an important mark of true Christian identity would involve only males.

The whole debate seems silly to us today, but I'm glad it happened, and so should you be. We ought to be glad it was so controversial because out of the debate over circumcision and other Jewish practices came some of the most beautiful theological affirmations of the Gospel that you can find in the New Testament.

Before I explain that, let's first consider *why* circumcision was such a hot button issue. We are right to take the Gentile's side in the debate on circumcision, but maybe we are too quick to dismiss the other side. When we understand what the Jewish Christians were really afraid of losing, we might realize that while they might have been wrong about circumcision, they were addressing a real concern.

So, let's try to see where they are coming from.

Judaism is the only major religion in world history that survived for centuries without having a county where they were the ethnic majority.

With no physical border to set them off as a nation among other nations,
with no land to call their own,

no king to rule them and no army to defend their right to exist as Jews,
what kept them bound together and helped them survive it all...

even thrive sometimes?

It was the disciplines centered in keeping the Sabbath that reminded them always who they were and what they were called to be as a people in the world. Their customs-

their distinctive dress,

their dietary commands,

and even circumcision

all go back to being a distinct and holy people of the Sabbath: a people who set one day a week apart for God-focused worship and rest to empower them to remain people of God when things get complicated at home, at work, and in the community. Of course, their ultimate calling was to be the people of the Law—a people of Justice and Mercy—but their persistence and courage came from the weekly, and then the daily reminders of who they are based on whose they are. And ever since Abraham, one of those reminders to be a Sabbath people was circumcision.

Since their survival of a people had been dependent on sticking together—being there for each other in diet, dress, and worship practices—were they suddenly supposed to let it all go? Not take seriously anymore all the marks and disciplines that helped raise their children in an identity and gave them a sense of place and belonging?

The Jesus event in history had a shocking result. Not only did many Jews see him as the messiah, there was a flood of Gentiles who found God in him.

Wanting to devote their lives to knowing and following Jesus

and wanting to live ethical and kind lives, mirroring Jesus, in a harsh world,
these Gentiles came into Jewish Christian communities



and started many of their own. They could understand the importance of living ethical lives. But it was beyond them to understand why they—as Romans, Greeks, Persians—follow rules to look like Jews in order to be Christian.

Fortunately for the Gentile followers of Jesus, they had a Jewish insider who took up their cause. The Apostle Paul was as Jewish as could be. He knew Jewish scriptures and customs inside out. He understood the fears of Peter, James, John, and the other Jewish leaders. So, when he argued for making concessions so Gentiles would feel more comfortable in church, he did so as a Jewish insider.

His contributions were twofold: political and theological.

It doesn't sound very religious, does it, to say that Paul was good at politics. But he was. Just read in Acts about the negotiations that took place at the Jerusalem Council. Paul could negotiate and compromise. He would move from the Jewish Christians to the Gentile Christians and say, "Look they can put up with you eating shellfish, but they really can't remain at the table when you eat meat with blood still in it." Then he could move from the Gentile Christians to the Jewish Christians and say, "The Gentiles are going to show their commitment to the larger church and continue to take up offerings to help the poor in Jerusalem, but you can forget about circumcision."

He was willing to negotiate non-essentials in order to protect the essential. Spiritual disciplines matter because they remind us who we are

(But we can compromise on what those disciplines will be).

Justice practices matter, because God wants us to work for justice, show mercy and be agents of healing and hope in the world

(But we live in the real world, so let's understand that justice looks different in different cultures).

Finding a consensus about rules and disciplines matter because it keeps a community cohesive and focused on their purpose.

(So let's decide what worship and prayer practices we'll practice together).

But though negotiation and compromise were necessary, the debate helped Paul understand and articulate what is the central belief of the whole Christian community that must not get lost among Jews or Gentiles. Like an irritant in an oyster that leads to a pearl, the irritant of this debate led to the pearl of the central Gospel witness—what it is about Jesus that caused Jew and Gentile alike to know and love God in a fresh and life transforming way.

The **defining truth** about what it means to be Christian is that we are sinners who fail to love as Jesus loved, and live as Jesus lived. We are sinners saved only by the grace of God. Lots of things matter, but *this is the truth about the source of our salvation*: God's unconditional love shown through Jesus Christ.

Paul found every which way to express the primacy of grace. Perhaps Paul's most beautiful expression is, in the 8th chapter of his letter to Rome, when he asks, "What could possibly separate us from God's love?" After asking that question a number of ways, he finishes with his answer,



“**Nothing.** Absolutely nothing can separate us from God’s love that we know in Christ Jesus our Lord.”

So why isn’t that Romans passage, or another the passages where Paul makes the argument for focusing on God’s grace, our New Testament lesson today?

It is because today, I want you to hear the testimony not just of the convincer but also of the convinced. There is something powerful about the witness of someone who has had a fundamental transformation of mind and heart.

- Dr. Paul Kalanithi wrote *When Breath Becomes Air*, giving voice to those facing a terrible diagnosis because he was facing a terrible diagnosis himself.
- Chuck Colson was able to inspire world-wide ministry for prisoners because he had been in prison himself.
- F. W. de Klerk was the last President of Apartheid South Africa because he was converted as a Christian to the view that apartheid was wrong and had to end.
- And Peter, the onetime defender of circumcision came to be the evangelist of baptism as the sign of God’s grace that he would defend to the end.

Some scholars might interject here offering their opinion that I and II Peter were not actually written by Peter himself. They may be right, but the letters were written under Peter’s name because they were written with his voice. The letters reflect Peter’s theological way of thinking, so I’ll refer to their author as Peter.

My point here is that there have not been enough Bible students and scholars who have given enough credit to Jewish Christian leaders for giving up on some practices that were so critical to their identity and embracing baptism as the defining sign of God’s central claim on our lives.

So, let’s listen as the convinced, Peter, speaks now for the convincer, Paul. “**This is what we believe,**” Peter begins our passage by saying. He then doesn’t tell the story of the Exodus but gives what would be a paraphrase of the Apostles’ Creed if the Apostles’ Creed were already written (and some version of it might have, but that’s a different story). “**Jesus suffered and died,**” Peter says, and then he, as a Spirit, “**preached to the spirits of those in prison.**” We can get ourselves wrapped in unnecessary knots by wondering what Peter means by preaching to those in prison, but basically Peter is saying that Jesus was God’s love among us, that love was abused because of our sin, but that God’s love reaches even those who otherwise deserve nothing but punishment. God’s love reaches you and me. That’s the Gospel. God loves us even in our sin, and God’s love delivers us from it.

Peter goes on to say—and *this is beautiful*—that God’s love is an Ark for us. As an Ark carried Noah and the animals through the flood, and as an *Ark of the Covenant* carried the Ten Commandments and guided the people in the wilderness, God’s forgiving and reconciling love is an ark in which we are carried.

And what is the sign of that unconditional love of God? Peter, who once was in the party that defended circumcision, says that it is *baptism*. Baptism is the perfect sign of God’s grace because it doesn’t take long for the water to dry and not be seen, even if the baptized had been



dunked. Baptism is a physical expression of God's grace precisely because it disappears on the outside. It is the outward sign of an inward grace.

But here is the thing that Peter wants to make clear and those in the Gentile camp need to embrace. What the Jewish Christian leaders were most afraid of losing was not really the practice of circumcision. Rather, they were afraid of losing the practice of *keeping disciplines as a way of life*: disciplines that bind a people together and actually make them effective witnesses to God's grace in the world.

To put it another way, Baptism says everything about identity, but it is primarily *God's identity*, not the one baptized.

- Consider the baby who is baptized, but never brought to church again.
God's grace is still proclaimed.
- Consider the adult who gets baptized just to make another member of the family happy, and never comes to church.
God's grace is still proclaimed.
- Consider the one baptized who ends up committing terrible crimes.
God's grace is still proclaimed.
- Consider the one who is baptized and then leaves the faith.
Still, God's grace is proclaimed.

What really marks Christian identity for the baptized is not so much the one-and-done event of baptism but the living of its truth. It is the *keeping of the Sabbath* and all the practices that should come from it that will help shape and mold a Christian identity. The specific practices—
how one worships,
how one prays,
how one finds ways to be generous and kind—
may be different here and there,
but let's be serious and sustain practices that remind us whose we are and the moral lives we are to lead.

Our Trent Get-Away speaker, Matt Gaventa made that point at the retreat. Like most of us, he was baptized as a baby. He is glad he was because, like me, the grace of God that baptism proclaims is the central truth of what he believes. But what has really shaped his identity is that his parents and his church community kept showing up and keeping the promises they made at his baptism. He remembers his parents bringing him to church Sunday after Sunday, saying prayers over meals and at bedtime, and expecting him to think about what Jesus would have him do and become in his daily life. His Sunday School teachers, his youth advisors... they kept showing up. Some of his friendships grew deeper in that he and friends began exploring together what it means for their lives that God loves them and calls them. He knows who he is as a Christian not simply because he is baptized, but because a whole community of people taught him and showed him what living one's baptismal identity can mean.



It was kind of funny, but during a break I so strongly agreed with what Matt had said, he almost regretted saying it. He thought that maybe he had come across in saying that baptism isn't important. I assured him that he had nothing to worry about. I have always believed that baptism is the most beautiful expression of the sheer grace of God that the church can come up with. But I also strongly believe that what is at the core of Sabbath keeping—showing up over and over again not just on Sundays for worship and rest—gives wisdom and strength for living with light the rest of the week. It is *not* what saves us, but it is what shapes us.

If Jewish Christians were so right in giving up circumcision as a sign of Christian identity, Gentile Christians were just as right in taking on Sabbath keeping as a core expression of what it means to follow Jesus. We love and honor God through worship and rest on one day so we can live and love God with heart, soul and strength every day.

