

God Admits Gentiles into His Church

Isaiah 11:1–10, Acts 11:11–18

Our Old Testament text prophesies that “the earth shall be full of the knowledge of the Lord as the waters cover the sea,” that “there shall be a Root of Jesse, who shall stand as a banner to the people ... *the Gentiles shall seek Him*, and His resting place shall be glorious” (Isa. 11:9–10). Here is a specific prophecy that God was going to bring Gentiles into the church of Jesus Christ.

In our New Testament text today the apostles took issue with Peter because he had eaten with uncircumcised Gentiles. But after hearing the testimony of Peter and the six brethren who went to Caesarea with him, the apostles became convinced. At the end of our text there is the exclamation, “Then God has also granted to the *Gentiles* repentance to life.” This was the fulfillment of Scripture; God was opening the doors of the church to the Gentiles. God himself was now admitting Gentiles into the church of Christ.

In biblical context “Gentile” means *not Jewish*. As Paul asserts: “For by one Spirit are we all baptized into one body, whether we be *Jews* or *Gentiles*, whether we be *bond* or *free*” (1 Cor. 12:13). Beginning at Pentecost, the infant church—even as the temple and synagogue before it—was predominantly Jewish. Any Gentile convert to the true religion had professed the *Shema* (“Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God is one LORD”) and received the rite of circumcision. In essence, he became a Jew. Gentile believers who were not circumcised but professed the *Shema* were called God-fearers. Cornelius is described as “a devout man and one who *feared God*” (Acts 10:2). Later, at a synagogue in Pisidia the apostle Paul began a sermon with the words, “Men of Israel, and *you who fear God*, listen” (Acts 13:16).

The early Jewish Christians saw the church as an extension of Judaism. They believed in Christ, but they continued to practice circumcision and keep kosher. And they assumed that the church would remain Jewish. They never in their wildest imagination entertained the thought that Gentiles would be admitted into the church, or that at some point the church would become predominantly Gentile. They were not ready to hear Paul declare himself to be the apostle to the Gentiles.

In his testimony before the apostles Peter describes in a matter-of-fact way what had happened. God had appeared to him in a vision of a great sheet let down from heaven, filled with all sorts of unclean animals. God had said, “Rise, Peter; kill and eat,” and when Peter protested he had followed up with the words, “What God has cleansed you must not call common.” The Holy Spirit instructed him to go with the Romans who had come to fetch him. As he began to preach to Cornelius’s household, Peter testified, “the Holy Spirit fell upon them, as upon us at the beginning.”

This was an amazing statement. There was no doubt in Peter's mind that what he and his six companions witnessed in Caesarea was the sovereign work of the Third Person of the Holy Trinity, the Spirit of Almighty God. The Holy Spirit "fell" upon the men and women of Cornelius' household, as well as his invited guests—uncircumcised Romans all—even as he had come upon the 120 disciples in the Upper Room on the Day of Pentecost. When he witnessed this, Peter "remembered the word of the Lord, how He said, 'John indeed baptized with water, but you shall be baptized with the Holy Spirit.'" Peter heard these ethnic Romans speaking in tongues, magnifying God, and recognized that what he had seen and heard was proof that these uncircumcised Gentiles had received the Holy Spirit of God, they were born again, they were testifying of his grace, they were worshipping God! Here was proof that Gentile hearts had been regenerated, that ethnic Romans had been brought to faith by God's grace and had become possessors of the Holy Spirit.

There are only two types of people in the world: those who have the Holy Spirit and those who do not. Those who have the Holy Spirit are "born again." Jesus taught this in John 3, where he said, "unless one is born of water *and the Spirit*, he cannot enter the kingdom of God. That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit. Do not marvel that I said to you, 'You must be born again.'" All living, breathing human beings were born the first time; we all came out of our mother's womb as newborn babies. But in order to enter heaven it is absolutely essential that we be born a second time, that is, "born again." When we were born the first time we were born of the flesh. But when we are born the second time—born again—we are born of the Holy Spirit of God. No sinner seeks God by nature. In our sin and rebellion we naturally run away from God. We don't want to consider the fact that we are sinners. We don't want to reckon with the holiness of God. We want to put out of our minds the fact that we are sinners who need to be changed into saints. We protest that we are good enough—that we by our good works *merit* heaven—but we do not.

The apostle Peter recalled how Jesus had said, "John indeed baptized with water, but you shall be baptized with the Holy Spirit." Here is a contrast between man's baptism and Christ's. Man has the ability to baptize with water—to mark out an individual by the application of water in Christian baptism. But only Christ has the ability to send his Spirit to work in the heart of an unregenerate sinner. Water baptism is a sign and seal of Spirit-baptism. Water itself does not wash away our sins; only the blood of Christ, applied by the sovereign Holy Spirit, can do that. The Heidelberg Catechism asks, "How does holy baptism remind and assure you that Christ's one sacrifice on the cross benefits you personally?" The answer: "In this way: Christ instituted this outward washing and with it promised that, as surely

as water washes away the dirt from the body, so certainly his blood and his Spirit wash away my soul's impurity, that is, all my sins."¹

What a wonderful promise, that the blood and Spirit of Christ washes away all my sins! My friend, there is no other way to get to heaven than to have your sins washed away by the blood of Christ, to have the efficacy of that blood shed upon a cruel Roman cross 2,000 years ago sovereignly applied to you by Christ's Holy Spirit. If the blood of Christ is applied to you, and received by true faith, then you can have assurance that all your sins are washed away by Christ's precious blood, that his Holy Spirit now dwells within you. This these Roman believers received by faith, and the evidence was speaking in tongues. "This is what it means to be a Christian: to be moved upon by the Holy Spirit in such a way that we are brought to faith and united to Jesus."²

Water baptism marks out "who's *in*"—that is, who is part of the covenant people—and "who's *out*," a fallen son or daughter of Adam, lost in sin, without hope in the world. But not everyone who receives the sacraments of baptism and the Lord's supper is a true believer.

Recently the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops voted to draft a statement on Holy Communion that admonishes Catholic politicians, including President Biden, who support abortion, that abortion kills an innocent human, an image bearer of Almighty God. Biden supports same-sex marriage and abortion, views which are antithetical to church doctrine. A growing number of bishops want to block politicians with views like Biden's from receiving Communion.

Biden attends mass each week. He has said he personally opposes abortion but supports a woman's right to choose—that is, to choose to kill her unborn child. His first budget, presented earlier this year, funds the killing of the unborn with tax dollars.

One bishop said, "Almost daily I speak with people ... who are confused by the fact that we have a president who professes devout Catholicism and yet advances the most radical pro-abortion agenda in our history."³

One Roman Catholic commentator, a former judge, writes that the church has condemned abortion as being among the gravest of sins. To Catholics, the baby in the womb is a distinct human being who enjoys the right to *live*—something that all true Christians heartily affirm.

The judge asks, can a person who facilitates killing a class of innocent human beings worthily receive the Blessed Sacrament? In a word: No. There is no

¹ Heidelberg Catechism Q&A 69, *Trinity Psalter Hymnal*, 883

² <https://www.desiringgod.org/interviews/what-is-the-baptism-of-the-holy-spirit>

³ <https://www.reuters.com/world/us/us-bishops-vote-draft-communion-statement-that-may-rebuke-biden-abortion-views-2021-06-18/>

ambiguity in the church's teaching about abortion. It is the gravest of evils. All humans have the right to live from conception to natural death. It is a core teaching of the Church: "Thou shalt not kill." I would add that "Thou shalt not kill" is the law-word of Almighty God.

The judge continues: the stumbling block for Biden and other Catholic supporters of abortion is whether or not the baby in the womb is a person. If the baby is a person, then all abortion is homicide. On the other hand, if he firmly believes that the baby in a womb is not a person, that somehow abortion does not kill an innocent human life, that Jesus in Mary's womb was not God and that Mary could morally have killed Him, then he should leave the Catholic Church.

But a person who directly and publicly employs the assets of government to kill babies and then receives the Blessed Sacrament nevertheless—if uncorrected by the hierarchy—will cause grave scandal.⁴

The president approves the murder of innocent bearers of God's image. He is an unrepentant murderer. Unless he repents, he is on his way to hell. The Bible is crystal-clear: "No murderer has eternal life abiding in him" (1 John 3:15). Hear that again: "No murderer has eternal life abiding in him." This is the word of the living God. As an unrepentant murderer, the president should not receive holy communion in a Christian church. He should not receive special treatment just because he is president. No unrepentant murderer is welcome in heaven, so he should not be welcome at the Lord's supper either.

Clearly any politician who promotes the killing of innocent human beings and forces taxpayers to fund the killing of innocent human beings against their conscience is an unrepentant murderer on his way to hell-fire. He should not under any circumstances receive holy communion, and any institution calling itself the church that tolerates such an abomination is a party to a grave evil and an offense against Christ, the Lord of the church.

The pope and the liberal bishops are warning that this could be divisive, and the bishops should not be hasty but take more time to discuss the issue before moving forward. This is their standard operating procedure: talk but do nothing. But let's get one thing straight: offering holy communion to unrepentant baby killers like Joe Biden and Nancy Pelosi is scandalous and a grave moral sin and a profaning of the holy name of Christ. It is an abandonment of the church's responsibility to be a moral voice in the world. It's time for the church to stand up and be the church. Until it does the right thing, it is not an institution worthy of respect.

I want to emphasize that I am in no way endorsing holy communion as administered in Roman Catholicism. To say that a Roman priest has the power to change bread and wine into the very body and blood of Christ is unbiblical.

⁴ Andrew P. Napolitano, "Joe Biden and the Blessed Sacrament," <http://www.judgenap.com/post/joe-biden-and-the-blessed-sacrament>

Peter cites our Lord's statement, "John baptized with water." Ministers of the church of Christ indeed offer the sacraments—baptism and the Lord's supper, but only the sovereign Spirit of God has the power to truly change hearts. Is your heart changed? Do you love the Lord Jesus Christ? Do you want to serve him from the heart? Oh, that we would desire daily to maintain our profession by a humble desire to submit to Christ in all things!

Jesus promised the church that "Whatsoever ye shall bind on earth shall be bound in heaven: and whatsoever ye shall loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven" (Matt. 18:18). "The Lord solemnly confers the grant made to Peter (Matt. 16:19) on the whole apostolate,"⁵ and thence to the church. Calvin's explanation is point-on: "Whoever, after committing a crime, humbly confesses his fault, and entreats the Church to forgive him, is absolved not only by men, but by God himself; and, on the other hand, whoever treats with ridicule the reproofs and threatenings of the Church, if he is condemned by her, the decision which men have given will be ratified in heaven."⁶

Notice that Peter testifies that the Holy Spirit "fell." This corresponds better to baptism by sprinkling than by immersion. In baptism by sprinkling, the water falls upon us, just as the Holy Spirit fell upon the early believers. In the case of the Caesarean believers, the Holy Spirit sovereignly descended while Peter preached. This was not in any way something that was contrived or orchestrated by the scheming of man.

In some circles the evangelist tries to produce an emotional atmosphere that is conducive to prompt people to "make a decision for Christ." There will be moving music, the evangelist will speak soothing, emotional words. There will be the singing of repeated verses of a hymn such as "Just as I am, without one plea, but that thy blood was shed for me, and that thou bidd'st me come to thee, O Lamb of God, I come, I come." The evangelist will urge people to get up out of their seat and come to the front. He will assure them that if they have courage to come to the front, God will surely receive them. Now certainly the sinner must come to Christ. "All that the Father giveth me shall come to me; and him that *cometh* to me I will in no wise cast out" (John 6:37). But the Bible never equates coming to Christ with walking down an aisle. The "altar call," as it is commonly practiced, is an invention of man, not something revealed by the Spirit of God. When Peter testified that the Spirit "fell" upon those at the house of Cornelius, he was bearing witness before the church that the reception of the Spirit by Cornelius' household and their speaking in "tongues"—languages previously unknown by the speaker—

⁵ Pulpit Commentary

⁶ John Calvin, *Commentary on the Evangelists* (John 18:18)

was not something orchestrated by man but produced by the sovereign Spirit of God.

Note the dramatic result. After hearing Peter's testimony—confirmed by his six traveling companions—the apostles, all Jews, “became silent.” They could not oppose what had happened at the home of Cornelius, but acknowledged, “Then God has also granted to the Gentiles repentance to life.” The church submits to the will of God. If a church does not submit, it is not a true church but a synagogue of Satan. The *true* church submits to Christ.

The church of Jesus Christ has a clear duty to be in submission to the will of God at every point, just as the Jerusalem apostles did when they acknowledged, “Then God has also granted to the Gentiles repentance to life.” The pouring out of the Holy Spirit was the act of God, indicating that Gentiles were now to be admitted into the church. The apostles saw this and acquiesced. God had spoken, and they must listen.

Some years ago a local United Church of Christ adopted a statement that affirms, contrary to Scripture, that people of all gender identities and sexual orientations are embraced within the family of God and the fellowship of the church. The statement explicitly mentions that “lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender people” are to be included in the common life of the church. “Fellowship” and “common life” include the Lord's supper and ordination to church office; in other words, practicing lesbians, gays, bisexuals and transgender people are encouraged to commune at the Lord's supper and pursue ordination as ministers of the word and sacrament. When the church I referred to adopted that statement, all faithful followers of Jesus Christ should have immediately left, for in adopting that statement that church was declaring itself in rebellion against Christ. That church distributes a yard sign which advertises, “Be proud. Be the church.” In other words, be proud of your sexual orientation, even if it is contrary to the teachings of Christ. The church calls itself a “United Church *of Christ*,” but it cannot be the church *of Christ* if it stands in rebellion against Christ! Christ is *Lord* and is to be *obeyed*. End of discussion! Jesus Christ is Lord of all. Disobey Christ to your eternal peril. He spoke clearly on the matter of sexuality in Matthew 19 when he said to the Pharisees, “Have you not read that He who made them at the beginning ‘made them male and female.’” Christ's teaching is definitive: There are only two sexes: male and female, determined at birth. All sexual activity should take place within the covenant of marriage, which is a lifelong commitment. There are not multiple genders (45 and counting?), there are *two*: male and female. The Creator doesn't put males into female bodies and *vice versa*. This is the definitive teaching of our Lord Jesus Christ, and anything that deviates from it is wicked and non-Christian, and nothing to be proud of, but thoroughly detestable. Through his

Spirit God will give grace to every Christian to live a life of chastity before marriage and faithfulness within marriage.

As to the slogan “Be proud, be the church”—that is, *be proud of your sexual orientation*—let us clearly declare that a Christian can never be proud of his sin. The Bible tells us to humble ourselves in the sight of the Lord, and he will lift us up (Jas. 4:10). The slogan “Be proud, be the church” is rebellion against Christ, the Lord of the church.

But at the same time, let me emphasize that lesbians, gays, bisexuals and transgender people are *warmly welcome* here at Grace OPC. I assure you that you will be welcomed with open arms! *All* of us are sinners; none of us deserves the grace of Christ. If we deserved it, it wouldn't be grace. *All* of us are prone to sin which so easily besets us. All of us need to attend a faithful church where the gospel is proclaimed. By all means, come hear the truth! As I said, you will be welcomed with open arms. You cannot come to the Lord's table until you profess that Jesus is your Lord—but this is for your good. Fellowship at the Lord's table means that the church is satisfied that you have a credible profession of faith and are walking in accordance with Scripture. If you have not made a profession of faith, then you need to be reminded each week that to do so is the number one need in your life. Christ could come at any moment. *Today* is the day of salvation; when you die (or Christ returns) it will be too late. If you are not allowed to commune at the Lord's table here on earth, it is a warning that you will not be allowed to commune at the marriage supper of the Lamb at the final day, that you will be excluded from heaven. If a church tells you this, it is showing you the love of Christ. On the other hand, an unfaithful church will offer you the sacrament of holy communion even if you do not make a credible profession of faith, and even if you do not live in accordance with Scripture. The unfaithful church may *seem* to be more loving, but it is actually being exceedingly *unloving*, for it is telling you, you're OK as you are; you do not need to profess Christ or give up your sin to be accepted in the sight of a holy God. Of course that's a lie! The unfaithful church is making you two-fold a child of hell. At the final day the Lord will ask you, “Why didn't you listen to *me*?” How can you know if a church is faithfully representing Christ? If its teaching is in accord with holy Scripture, if what it teaches is the express teaching of Scripture, or properly deduced from Scripture. You have a responsibility to be discerning. Be like the Bereans, who “received the word with all readiness of mind, and searched the scriptures daily,” whether the things taught by Paul were so. A faithful pastor will never be offended if you went to verify his teaching by Scripture.

A true church submits to Christ, as did the church at Jerusalem. God had demonstrated that he was admitting Gentiles into his church, and the apostles,

leaders of the church, submitted to his will: “Then God has also granted to the Gentiles repentance to life.”

Why did the church conclude that uncircumcised gentiles should be admitted? Ultimately, it was the sovereign act of God himself who opened up the church to the Gentiles. This is so important, as it establishes for all time that all who receive Christ by faith—both Jew and Gentile—are to be admitted into the communion of the church.

The matter of who is admitted into the church is exceedingly important, for when the church is doing its job, the person who is admitted into the church is the person who is admitted into heaven. Does the question get your attention: *Do you want to go to heaven?*

Christian, you have been given the gift of the Holy Spirit. It has not been received in dramatic fashion, as on Pentecost and again in Caesarea, but you have been given the Holy Spirit nonetheless. This you know on the Bible’s authority: “But you are not in the flesh but in the Spirit, if indeed the Spirit of God dwells in you. Now if anyone does not have the Spirit of Christ, he is not His” (Rom. 8:9).

May God grant us all the desire and ability to live out our faith in humble reliance upon him. Amen.