

Identity in Christ according to Paul

1. To be in Christ does not obliterate or displace the particularity of one's origins or identity: there was diversity in the Christ movement from the earliest days, Jews and gentiles were the two main groups.
2. Paul regarded the maintenance of diversity in Christ as valuable and not merely as a temporary concession to Judaism, as indicated by the following texts:
 - a) Remain in the calling in which you were called (1 Cor. 7:20)
 - b) Let each be fully convinced in his/her own mind (Rom. 14:5).
 - c) Welcome one another as Christ welcomed you (Rom. 15:7)
3. Despite Paul's statements such as 'circumcision is nothing', one's former existence is relativised in Christ; to relativise means to revise one's priorities but not to obliterate one's former identity. Paul goes on to say that 'uncircumcision is also nothing'. (1 Cor. 7:19). The Lordship of Christ is ultimate and other aspects of life remain within a changed perspective.
4. In Christ Jews remain Jews and gentiles remain gentiles (WDDavies) as is evidenced in two parallel missions within one Christ movement – one led by Peter and the other by Paul.
5. These should not be viewed as mutually exclusive competing missions but rather as evidence of cooperation and mutual recognition within God's work – the same Lord worked equally in Peter as in Paul, (Gal. 2:7-9).
6. If Paul is apostle to the gentiles how did he conceive his own identity – who did he think he was? In his own words 'I myself am an Israelite', (Rom. 11: 1).
7. If Paul identifies himself as an Israelite then he cannot fully identify with gentiles; gentile Christ-believers and Jewish Christ-believers are the same in sin and salvation but not in ethnicity.
Paul remains a Jewish apostle to gentiles.
8. This self-description as an Israelite is not merely one identity description in a series of 'Nested Identities' it is rather of fundamental significance, other descriptions such as 'of the tribe of Benjamin' should be seen as sub-identities, (Rom. 11:1, Phil. 2:4-6, also Rom. 9:1-5).
9. Paul describes himself as an Israelite, but if gentiles in Christ remain gentiles then there is no corporate identity as yet for all those in Christ except possibly 'being in Christ' or 'the body of Christ'. The church is not yet the term that describes the corporate identity of all Christians. Paul can speak of all the 'assemblies of Christ in Judea' and also of 'all the churches of the gentiles', (Gal. 1:22, Rom. 16:4, cf. also 16:16).
10. So Paul's gentile congregations are satellite communities of Israel but not to be identified with Israel. All believers are called 'those who are called not from the

Jews only but also from the gentiles' but Paul does not go on to describe all the called as Israel, (Rom. 9:24). The term 'Christian' is neither used nor known by Paul, and the term 'new Israel' did not come into use until a century after Paul, (it is anachronistic to speak at this time of 'Jewish versus Christian identity').

11. So Paul still lives in hope that all Israel will be saved and rejects as unthinkable the idea that God would reject the people of Israel, (Rom. 11:1,7,11)

12. Thus Paul operates in an Israel-centred universe in which the Messiah of Israel enables gentile believers to SHARE the inheritance and identity of Israel not as proselytes or second class Jews but as equals – as gentiles in Christ.

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