

“No Perfect People Allowed” ~ An Ally’s Re-Reading of Ephesians 2:11-22¹

Nii Addo Abrahams, M.A., M.Div

¹¹ So then, remember that at one time you Gentiles by birth, called “the uncircumcision” by those who are called “the circumcision”—a physical circumcision made in the flesh by human hands—¹² remember that you were at that time without Christ, being aliens from the commonwealth of Israel, and strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world. ¹³ But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ. ¹⁴ For he is our peace; in his flesh he has made both groups into one and has broken down the dividing wall, that is, the hostility between us. ¹⁵ He has abolished the law with its commandments and ordinances, that he might create in himself one new humanity in place of the two, thus making peace, ¹⁶ and might reconcile both groups to God in one body through the cross, thus putting to death that hostility through it. ¹⁷ So he came and proclaimed peace to you who were far off and peace to those who were near; ¹⁸ for through him both of us have access in one Spirit to the Father. ¹⁹ So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are citizens with the saints and also members of the household of God, ²⁰ built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the cornerstone. ²¹ In him the whole structure is joined together and grows into a holy temple in the Lord; ²² in whom you also are built together spiritually into a dwelling place for God.

During the holidays I visited a church in my partner’s hometown. It’s a small church plant connected to a nondenominational megachurch based in Texas. My partner and I (well, just me; she didn’t drive at all) had just spent the past two days making the drive from Princeton, and after a few weeks of pushing myself to the limit to get through the end of the semester, I had decided—perhaps foolishly—to reset my body by quitting caffeine cold turkey. That Sunday morning was the first time I hadn’t started my day with coffee in weeks. It was almost as if the service that morning was designed to put me to sleep: trip fatigue, caffeine withdrawal, dim lights, boring sermon.

Although I believe that church should be a place of rest, I felt it would be a bad look for a future pastor to be caught drooling when the lights came up. So, I took a mid-service break to stretch my legs and use the restroom. I hoped the bright lights would give me a little energy to

¹ This was originally written in December 2020 for Dr. Lindsey Jodrey’s “Queer Hermeneutics” course at Princeton Theological Seminary.

make it through the rest of the morning. As I stood in front of the urinal, I studied the strategically-placed church flyer in front of me. The church slogan — “No Perfect People Allowed” — screamed at me in neon green letters. Below, there was a box with a list of all the types of imperfect people they wanted to come.

Broken. Tired. Poor. Porn Addict. Smoker. Drinker. Not Good Enough. Messy. Alcoholic. Questioning God. Imperfect. Ashamed. Willing. Searching for Answers. Don’t Know God. Lonely. Rich. Unhappy. Straight. Gay. Judgmental. Drug Addict. Hungry.²

I skimmed the list, mostly curious to see what qualities the person who made the flyer decided made someone imperfect. I was not surprised by what I found, until I got closer to the end of the list. There it was; two words benignly nestled among a host of supposedly negative qualities.

Straight. Gay.

I suppose I should not have been surprised to see “gay” on the list. I know this church and its parent church are not affirming. The fact that this flyer made “gay” an imperfection like being an alcoholic or drug-addicted or a generally unhappy person wasn’t a surprise. What struck me in the moment, then, was not the fact that “gay” was on the list, but rather the implication of its presence there along with “straight.” Standing in front of a urinal for far longer than was necessary, I realized that this poster and this slogan were not so benign after all. To place “gay” and “straight” next to one another is to say that both are welcome because nobody’s perfect. Straight, gay, it doesn’t matter; everyone’s a sinner, right? No perfect people allowed. But that seemingly benign welcome hides a harmful expectation. In this church, being straight isn’t an imperfection. It’s not a sin. And no one will ever ask you if being straight is the reason you’re there. But in this church, being gay is a different story. To be gay — or queer in any way — is to

² “Welcome | Gateway Branson | ‘Church for People Who Don’t Like Church,’” Gateway Branson, accessed January 2, 2020, <https://gatewaybranson.org/>.

embody an imperfection. And you're expected to be trying to overcome it, either by getting rid of it — erasure — or living as though it doesn't exist — assimilation.

This text from Ephesians reminds me of the flyer above the urinal. By the time this letter was written, the argument about whether Gentiles (non-Jews) could be part of God's family was basically settled.³ But that didn't mean things were easy.⁴ We don't know much about the situation of the church this letter may have been written to, but we know that Jews and Gentiles did not always get along or understand each other. The late Irish biblical scholar Ernest Best says that from the Gentile perspective, "Jews were despised for their peculiar ways and their high opinion of themselves as the unique people of God."⁵ On the other hand, because of their sense that God called God's people to live differently than the peoples around them, many Jewish people "refused to assimilate . . . to the prevailing culture."⁶ We know, for example, that in the church in Rome, Jews and Gentiles quarreled over what to eat and when to worship (Rom 14:1-12), and in Galatia, there were some Jews who thought Gentiles had to become circumcised — in effect, to become Jews — in order to be part of the church (Gal 5:2-6).⁷ So it seems that in this letter, the author is trying to address this question of inclusion again, maybe in hopes of resolving some tensions between Jews and Gentiles in a particular community. And to do that, the author

³ I am assuming here that Paul is not the author of Ephesians. For more, see Walter F. Taylor Jr., *Paul, Apostle to the Nations: An Introduction* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2012), 21–26, 289.

⁴ Ernest Best, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on Ephesians*, International Critical Commentary (London: T&T Clark, 2010), 235; Nils Alstrup Dahl, "Gentiles, Christians, and Israelites in the Epistle to the Ephesians," *The Harvard Theological Review* 79, no. 1/3 (1986): 37–38.

⁵ Best, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on Ephesians*, 256.

⁶ Best, 256.

⁷ Taylor Jr., *Paul, Apostle to the Nations*, 230–32; Benjamin H. Dunning, "Strangers and Aliens No Longer: Negotiating Identity and Difference in Ephesians 2," *The Harvard Theological Review* 99, no. 1 (2006): 9–10.

chooses to tell a theological story to their Gentile readers of how God brought them into God's family.

That story begins with a simple reminder: Gentiles didn't always have it so great. They were called the uncircumcised, which meant that they were outside of the scope of God's promises to Israel (v. 12). They were hopeless and godless. Quite frankly, they were screwed. But Christ changed everything. In Christ, the Gentiles were brought from "far off" to "near" by Christ's blood (v. 13). They have been brought near to God and therefore they have been brought into the commonwealth of Israel and the covenants of promise. But the author does something interesting in the next verse. They say that the two groups — Jews and Gentiles — have been made into one in Christ's own flesh. What exactly it means to be in Christ's flesh isn't entirely clear, but the point the author wants to make it is; the hostility which separated Jews and Gentiles has been torn down so that, together, they can become a new creation, reconciled to God (v. 16) but also to each other.⁸ In other words, Christ has not simply saved the Gentiles from their sins. Christ has also united the Jews and Gentiles in one body, bringing peace where there used to be conflict (vv. 15-17). No longer are the Gentiles "strangers and aliens," separated from the Jews by a wall of hostility; through Christ, they have become full members of God's family. In Christ they are joined with their Jewish siblings and are built up into a place where God dwells. Their community becomes a place where God's Spirit moves in power.⁹

It is a happy vision. But I cannot help but notice the subtle ways this text does the same thing the flyer above the urinal does. What separated the Gentiles from the commonwealth of Israel? Their flesh — that with which they were born, that which they could not change. Their

⁸ Best, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on Ephesians*, 259.

⁹ Best, 290.

flesh marked them as different, as set apart for hopelessness and godlessness. Yet this was never necessary. Gentiles were never inherently “other”; they were made other — called “the uncircumcision” — by people who saw themselves as the sole possessors of the divine promise. Note how Christian identity in this passage is all about movement — moving from far off to near (v. 13), moving from two groups to one (v. 15), moving from being strangers and aliens to being citizens and members of God’s household (v. 18). This text makes it seem as though it was the Gentiles who had to do all the moving!¹⁰ It was the Gentiles who were brought from far off to come near. They — not the people of Israel — are the ones who the author says have moved from being strangers to being citizens. Their fundamental identity needed to change in order for them to become part of God’s family.

Behind the language of reconciliation, I see the language of assimilation and erasure. There was (at the risk of being glib) a sort of Judeo-normativity that looked a lot like cis-het normativity; expectations that pressured you to conform if you wanted to get in. Jew, Gentile, it doesn’t matter; but the truth is, if you’re a Gentile, you can’t stay that way. And to my eyes, that’s the same message that’s hidden on that flyer above the urinal. “No Perfect People Allowed.” Straight, gay, it doesn’t matter; but if you’re gay, you can’t stay that way. Assimilate. Erase. Conform.

I do not trust this text. I do not trust flyers that say “No Perfect People Allowed” or churches that say “All Are Welcome.” I do not trust clarion calls for unity, for peace, for reconciliation. I am reminded of the words of Brian Bantum, who — when speaking of racial reconciliation — says,

Too often, the language of reconciliation presupposes a relationship, that we somehow know what the end of this process looks like, that in the end, I have to sit at the table of

¹⁰ Dunning, “Strangers and Aliens No Longer,” 8.

fellowship. This is not freedom, but another form of coercion. Too many reconciliation conversations funded by white churches do not risk the possibility that dark bodies do not want to be with them, that what nonwhite Christians really want is a life where their wholeness is presupposed.¹¹

As a black man, I know this to be true. I have heard it; I have seen it; I have been asked to participate in it. But I also know that I have heard these same sentiments from my queer siblings. Reconciliation too often looks more like assimilation or erasure, like tiny, poisonous tyrannies swallowed day by day in an attempt to assuage the powerful.¹² We cis-het Christians who exist within and profit from the pervasive cis-het normativity of the church ask queer Christians to come from far off and meet us where we are, to pledge themselves to our covenant and to forget the wall of hostility that has separated us for so long; yet we are the ones who built the wall!

And what is perhaps the most damning, the most damaging, the most dangerous part of it all is that I don't think most of us realize what we're doing. For most of my life, in fact, I could have been the person who made that flyer above the urinal, and I would have done it without hesitation because I would have assumed that I was being welcoming in the way God wants us to be welcoming. Because that's how cis-het normativity works. It tells us that God's desire for reconciliation means that we have the right to call our queer siblings Gentiles and to decide when they are welcome. It tells us that doing this is God's work. And it fools us into assuming that after all this, when queer folks are harmed in body, mind, and spirit, that we surely cannot be the source of the hostility. Surely, we are not the problem.¹³

¹¹ Brian Bantum, *The Death of Race: Building a New Christianity in a Racial World* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2016), 137.

¹² Audre Lorde, "The Transformation of Silence into Language and Action," in *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches* (Freedom, CA: The Crossing Press, 1984), 41.

¹³ Olive Elaine Hinnant, *God Comes out: A Queer Homiletic*, The Center for Lesbian and Gay Studies in Religion and Ministry (Cleveland: Pilgrim, 2007), 2.

If we Christians who do not identify as queer want to be good allies, we must consider the possibility that what Bantum says about black folks is true for queer folks.¹⁴ Why? Because they are not the problem. We must consider the possibility that we have lost the privilege of sitting at the table with our queer siblings because of the damage we have done, because of the walls of hostility we have built, because of the cis-het normativity that we live in and benefit from. We must consider the possibility that — even if we think we have never said or done something to harm a queer person — queer bodies do not want to be with us, that what some queer Christians really want is a life where their wholeness is presupposed and a church where they can worship without us.

But I also believe that together we can imagine a new way, a way that gets us to the place where this passage ends but does not require the assimilation and erasure of queer people in order to get there. Because even though I don't trust this text, I believe that we can make it trustworthy. I believe that we can learn to read differently with the help of the Spirit and with queer folks on our minds and at our side. We can read in a way that acknowledges the danger of a text and nevertheless chooses to wrestle with it until it gives us a blessing. And I want to acknowledge that this kind of reading is difficult for many of us who are learning what it means to be an ally. Many of us were raised in traditions that taught us that the Bible means "what it says" and we can't question that. And even if, like me, you've arrived at a place where you realize that the meanings of Scripture are constructed and not handed down from heaven, your first instinct might be to respect the text, rather than challenge it, because this sort of reading still feels like blasphemy. I want you to know that I get it. And I feel that. But I also know that it is a small thing for me to sacrifice my comfort for the sake of a more liberating reading. It is a small

¹⁴ And perhaps even more so for those who sit at the intersection of these two groups.

thing to be a little indecent, a little risky, perhaps even a little blasphemous, if it means that my queer siblings no longer need to swallow cis-het tyrannies until they sicken and die.¹⁵ And I've learned that this kind of reading is also liberating for me as a cis-het man. It's helped me see the ways I, too, have been harmed by cis-het normativity and given me tools to push back against the harmful aspects of normative masculinity that I've internalized.

So, let's get to it.

The first thing we see as we return to the text is that it is initially addressed to Gentiles. In our re-reading of this text, that means this text is initially addressed to queer folks; those of us who do not identify as queer are bystanders, listening in. Here in this text and in our communities, we — and from here on I use “we” to refer to those who share my identity as cisgender and heterosexual — need to become okay with being de-centered. For many of our faith communities, the imaginary person for whom everything is designed is cis-het. But if we are serious about becoming a body, a whole that works together and thrives amidst difference — if we are serious about creating communities where cis-het normativity is replaced with a spirit of freedom and liberation and queerness — then we must give up being the center of attention.

We must also repent for how we have stigmatized and pathologized our queer siblings. We have called them “the uncircumcision” (v. 11). In the ancient context, calling the Gentiles “the uncircumcision” was shorthand for calling them depraved. Elsewhere in Ephesians the author says that without God, Gentiles were ignorant and hard of heart; insensitive and licentious; greedy and impure; corrupt and deluded (4:18-22). These were standard stereotypes — and I emphasize stereotypes — used to explain what made God's people different from Gentiles. It was as though circumcision cut off their sin along with their foreskin.

¹⁵ Lorde, “The Transformation of Silence,” 41.

This, of course, was not true. Israel's history is defined by its own embodiment of all of these stereotypes! But in this text, we see how some Jews constructed their own identity in opposition to a made-up Gentile other. Similarly, operating within cis-het normativity, we often pile up our fears, self-hatred, and taboos and place them on a queer scapegoat.¹⁶ Yet doing so requires us to ignore something which this passage points out; our own circumcision, our own so-called normalcy, is a construct "made by human hands" (v. 11), fleeting and impermanent.¹⁷ We made it up!

Now I do think it's important to say that, in the same way that not all cis-het people believe the stereotypes about queer people, not all Jews would agree with these stereotypes about Gentiles. To assume as much would be, at best, an oversimplification, and at worst, anti-Semitic. But we must acknowledge that even if not all Jews agreed, Jewish culture — in the myriad of ways it sought to distinguish itself from Gentile culture — was influenced and shaped by these stereotypes. Much in the same way, the culture of our society and our churches is influenced and shaped by anti-queer stereotypes. Everything from bathrooms and school dress codes to gendered language for God is influenced by cis-het constructs. And this is something for which we must repent.

In v. 12 the author says that the Gentiles were without God, aliens from the commonwealth of Israel. But we know that this has never been true. We know that throughout Israel's history, God has always taken the side of the oppressed and the marginalized, regardless of whether they were found in Israel. The slaves that fled Egypt were a mixed multitude (Ex

¹⁶ Thomas H. Troeger, "No More Scapegoats," sermon (St. John's Episcopal Cathedral: Denver, CO, October 10, 1998), reprinted in Hinnant, *God Comes Out*, 42.

¹⁷ Teresa J. Hornsby and Ken Stone, "Already Queer: A Preface," in *Bible Trouble: Queer Reading at the Boundaries of Biblical Scholarship*, ed. Teresa J. Hornsby and Ken Stone, Society of Biblical Literature: Semeia Studies, v. 67 (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2011), xii.

12:38). Hagar was an Egyptian slave girl. Rahab was a prostitute from Jericho. Jael was a gender-queer killer.¹⁸ Ruth was a Moabite widow. We know that God was with these Gentiles (and so many others), even though they seem to fit all of the stereotypes of the godless. Likewise, we know that God has been with our queer siblings, even when we thought that they were hopeless and godless, precisely because of the ways they have been oppressed and marginalized. We might rewrite the beginning v. 12 to say, “Remember that you were at that time thought to be without Christ.”

So, in v. 13, the meaning of this text is reversed. The subject of v. 13 is actually ambiguous; it simply says speaks of “you who were once far off.” But in our re-reading, queer folks have never been without God. They have never been far off from God. In this version, we cis-het Christians are the ones who are far off. Our participation in cis-het normativity and our failure to listen to and honor our queer siblings have together estranged us from God in ways that we cannot remedy on our own. Yet thanks be to God that even though we are far off, we can be brought near by the blood of Christ, who breaks down the wall which divides us (v. 14).

But this wall, like every other wall, cannot be broken in one fell swoop. Instead, Christ breaks it down brick by brick, handing each stone to us — its builders — so that we might see and acknowledge what we have done and set it aside forever. He abolishes the cis-het norms, the “commandments and ordinances” which constrain all of us and instead creates something new in himself which makes room for all of us (vv. 15-16). In his body — a body which, as Bantum writes, overturned “every notion of propriety to be with us” — we find ourselves open to the

¹⁸ Deryn Guest, “From Gender Reversal to Genderfuck: Reading Jael through a Lesbian Lens,” in *Bible Trouble: Queer Reading at the Boundaries of Biblical Scholarship*, ed. Teresa J. Hornsby and Ken Stone, Society of Biblical Literature: Semeia Studies, v. 67 (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2011), 9–43.

Spirit of God, the same Spirit which hovered over the waters at the dawn of creation.¹⁹ This Spirit is open to queerness, because creation itself is queer: “blurry, messy, unstable, and dynamic.”²⁰ Indeed, this Spirit is queer. It, too, overturns propriety. It moves in unexpected, indecent ways that cause us to question what we have always believed.²¹ Filled with this Spirit, we find ourselves looking a little queerer than we used to. We begin to recognize that we are not strangers or aliens to queerness (v. 19). Our conformity to cis-het norms is nothing but a mirage, a lie we have told ourselves to maintain our positions of power and privilege. None of us have ever measured up to the standards of cis-het normativity; not fully, and not consistently. And so we choose to become traitors to those systems and join our queer siblings as members of the household of a God who we now know is in the business of queering. In Christ, God’s queer Spirit builds us together into a dwelling place for God (v. 22). The Spirit moves among us in dynamic, creative ways that push the boundaries of what we think is appropriate. God’s dwelling place, then, is not just a holy temple (v. 21); it is a queer temple.

This passage isn’t a clobber text. On the surface, it doesn’t even seem like a text that needs queering; just like that flyer above the urinal seemed like a neutral welcome. Yet my reading demonstrates how the language of reconciliation can mask expectations of assimilation and erasure. This text from Ephesians has given us the opportunity to read with suspicion, to look for the ways a seemingly benign text can uphold cis-het normativity and re-read it as a text that describes a vision of God’s family that is good news for all of us. We who are committed to

¹⁹ Bantum, *The Death of Race*, 155.

²⁰ Hornsby and Stone, “Already Queer,” xi.

²¹ Dale B. Martin, *Sex and the Single Savior: Gender and Sexuality in Biblical Interpretation* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2006), 159–60.

being good allies need to take up this sort of reading; not just for the sake of our queer siblings, but for our own sakes as well. Reading queerly sets us free too.

Bibliography

- Bantum, Brian. *The Death of Race: Building a New Christianity in a Racial World*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2016.
- Best, Ernest. *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on Ephesians*. International Critical Commentary. London: T&T Clark, 2010.
- Dahl, Nils Alstrup. "Gentiles, Christians, and Israelites in the Epistle to the Ephesians." *The Harvard Theological Review* 79, no. 1/3 (1986): 31–39.
- Dunning, Benjamin H. "Strangers and Aliens No Longer: Negotiating Identity and Difference in Ephesians 2." *The Harvard Theological Review* 99, no. 1 (2006): 1–16.
- Guest, Deryn. "From Gender Reversal to Genderfuck: Reading Jael through a Lesbian Lens." In *Bible Trouble: Queer Reading at the Boundaries of Biblical Scholarship*, edited by Teresa J. Hornsby and Ken Stone, 9–43. Society of Biblical Literature: Semeia Studies, v. 67. Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2011.
- Hinnant, Olive Elaine. *God Comes out: A Queer Homiletic*. The Center for Lesbian and Gay Studies in Religion and Ministry. Cleveland: Pilgrim, 2007.
- Hornsby, Teresa J., and Ken Stone. "Already Queer: A Preface." In *Bible Trouble: Queer Reading at the Boundaries of Biblical Scholarship*, edited by Teresa J. Hornsby and Ken Stone, ix–xiv. Society of Biblical Literature: Semeia Studies, v. 67. Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2011.
- Martin, Dale B. *Sex and the Single Savior: Gender and Sexuality in Biblical Interpretation*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2006.
- Taylor Jr., Walter F. *Paul, Apostle to the Nations: An Introduction*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2012.
- Gateway Branson. "Welcome | Gateway Branson | 'Church for People Who Don't Like Church.'" Accessed January 2, 2020. <https://gatewaybranson.org/>.