

“IN CHRIST”

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There is in a Russian palace, a famous “Hall of Beauty,” wherein are hung over eight hundred and fifty portraits of young maidens. These pictures were painted by Count Rotari, for Catharine the Second, the Russian empress; and the artist made a journey, through the fifty provinces of that vast empire of the north, to find his models.

In these superb portraits that cover the walls of this reception hall, there is said to be a curiously expressed compliment to the artist’s royal patron, a compliment half concealed and half revealed. In each separate picture, it is said, might be detected, by the close observer, some hidden, delicate reference to the empress for whom they were painted. Here a feature of Catharine appears; there an attitude is reproduced, some act, some favorite adornment or environment, some jewel, fashion, flower, style of dress, or manner of life—something peculiar to, or characteristic of, the empress—so that the walls of the saloon are lined with just so many silent tributes to her beauty, or compliments to her taste. So inventive and ingenious is the spirit of human flattery when it seeks to glorify a human fellow-mortal, breaking its flask of lavish praise on the feet of an earthly monarch.

The Word of God is a picture gallery, and it is adorned with tributes to the blessed Christ of God the Saviour of mankind.

It may not be too far-fetched to claim that the *in-Christ* theme is the center of Paul’s teaching.¹ Between Mexico City and Vera Cruz on the Carribean, there is a 19,000 ft. volcano, Mount Orizaba. Back in the ‘90s I flew there with a group of hikers to climb this peak. Of the party of eight climbers eventually only two of us succumb to mountain sickness at the 14,000 ft. base camp. We went on to stand on the rim of the summit crater which was a vast caldron. Inside this bowl was a smaller crater which contained a dome.

¹ One of the most articulate proponents of this position was Albert Schweitzer, who, using the metaphor of a volcano, described Paul’s *in-Christ* motif as the main crater and justification by faith as a subsidiary crater, formed within the rim of the main crater. Albert Schweitzer, *Mysticism of Paul the Apostle*, trans. William Montgomery (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins, 1953), 224, 225. For a brief survey of other leading scholars who expose this position, see James D. G. Dunn, *The Theology of Paul the Apostle* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 390-393.

Using the metaphor of a volcano, Paul's *in-Christ* theme as the main crater and justification by faith as a subsidiary crater, formed within the rim of the main crater. Paul used the term *in Christ*, and other related terms such as, "in the Lord," "in Him," "with Christ," "through Christ," dozens of times throughout his writings.² Paul's use of these words so far outnumbers other New Testament writers that these concepts could practically be labeled as distinctive for Paul.³

His employment of this theme can be seen against the background that throughout the New Testament, the Christ event, which is, the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus, is the definitive lens through which all of God's communication with humanity is filtered (John 5:39-40; Heb. 1:1-3). Not only does all of God's communication with humanity now refract through the Christ's life, death and resurrection, but all of humanity's actions with God are now defined and empowered through this reality. In Judaism a person's relationship to God and society was measured by his faith and relationship to the Torah or teaching of the Old Testament, with the advent of Christ, all of a person's relation to God and relation to other people are dealings measured and defined by his relationship to Christ. As Hebrews says, "In the past God spoke to our forefathers through the prophets at many times and in various ways, but in these last days He has spoken to us by His Son" (Heb. 1:1-2, NIV).

The *in-Christ* experience is the Christian's new environment. It is like the air. As we are in the air and the air is in us, so we are in Christ and Christ is in us.⁴ This *in-Christ* experience can also be described as a bond or union between Christ and you, the believer, which is a concrete reality.

It is a bond that perhaps, heretofore, we have not rightly appreciated. Like the woman who went on her first anniversary vacation with her newlywed husband. They enjoyed the finest accommodations at a world class destination spot. Everything went well until they return trip. Going through the airport security, they waited for the departure when she discovered an expensive jewel

² For example, he used the phrase "*en Christo*," approximately 84 times.

³ For example, 1 Peter 3:16; 5:10, 14 is the only other place in the New Testament that the phrase *en Christo* is used.

⁴ A. Deissmann, *St Paul, A Study in Social and Religious History*, trans. Lionel Strachan (New York: Hodder and Stoughton, 1912), 140, 142, as referenced in George Eldon Ladd, *A Theology of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993), 523.

was missing from her wardrobe. He had given it to her as a family heirloom. She was so distraught she burst into tears. He took her into his arms and comforted her saying it was only a rock.

They went back to security to search for it, but to no avail. All the way home she was downcast. When she realized that what she had with her husband was so much more important than what she had lost, then everything came into perspective. Arriving at home she received a phone call from security with the happy news that they had found her missing article. But she was now the wiser that her union with her husband was far superior than any article of display.

Shall we have such an appreciation of the union which we enjoy with Christ?

There are two principal dimensions to this reality that can be derived from the New Testament are the objective—or, existing facts that stand outside of us as determined by God;—and the subjective dimensions, as we experience them.

An objective reality is one that exists irrespective of our knowledge of, appreciation for, or contribution to that reality. Gravity is a law which exists objectively prior to my arrival on earth. I may choose to experience it when I choose to take my first steps and find out that I stick to earth's surface. The sun is a constant objective reality outside of my control. I may choose to experience its warmth after a chilly night by stepping into its warming rays. The air is another common objective reality. I may choose to breath it in and experience its life-giving properties as my lungs make the exchange and send it on its way through my circulatory system.

In many places, Paul presents Jesus of Nazareth as God's act of salvation and righteousness. It was God's doing that is not dependent on our participation in those actions. Those actions are commonly referred to as, "what God did for us," or "what He has, or is doing outside of us."

Justification and redemption have been accomplished *in Christ*. "For all have sinned, and come short of the glory of God; being justified freely by his grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus" (Rom. 3:23, 24). We have been foreordained and chosen *in Christ* before the foundations of the world. "According as he hath chosen us in him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and without blame before him in love." "In whom we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of sins, according to the riches of his grace" (Eph. 1:4, 7). The totality of salvation is *in Christ* (2 Tim.

2:10). The ideal mind to imitate is *in Christ*. “Let this mind be in you which was also in Christ Jesus” (Phil. 2:5). There is a love *of Christ*⁵ from which we cannot be separated (Rom. 8:35). In most of these passages, the objective dimension of the *in-Christ* theme has to do with salvation.

When Goliath went forth to challenge Saul and his Israelite army, he represented the Philistine domination of God’s people. He demanded a representative warrior from Israel to fight in the contest of domination. The shepherd boy David volunteered to go forth believing that the Lord had called him and would bring the deliverance. When Goliath collapsed all the Philistines were defeated, and God through David delivered all Israel.

A key passage that probably could be seen as a comprehensive summary of the objective *in Christ* formula, particularly where salvation is concerned, is 2 Cor. 5:18, 19. “Now all these things are from God, who reconciled us to Himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation, namely, that God was *in Christ* reconciling the world to Himself and not counting their trespasses against them” (ASV).⁶

This passage teaches that the reconciliation was an act accomplished wholly and completely by God through the instrumentality of the person of Christ.⁷ “Primarily, reconciliation is not a change in man’s attitude towards God. Rather reconciliation is first of all an event, an objective event, accomplished by God for the salvation of sinners. God’s love manifested in reconciliation is not focused on the moment when the individual sinner believes in Christ and finds his attitude towards God changed from enmity to love. God’s love manifested in reconciliation took place long before, ‘while we were enemies,’ of God, in the objective historical event of Christ’s death. Love towards God evoked in the hearts of sinners by the revelation of God’s wondrous love towards us on the cross does not

⁵ Although this phrase is not *in Christ*, the Greek *tou Christou* “of Christ” certainly describes the objective love of Jesus.

⁶ See also Rom. 5:8-12.

⁷ Another passage that communicates this reality most forcefully (although without the explicit use of the term *in Christ*) especially as seen from the Greek is Romans 5:8-10.

constitute, but *is the acceptance* of the reconciliation already effected by the cross before sinners heard of it and responded to it.”⁸

Before God saved us in ourselves, He first saved us objectively, 2,000 years ago, in the person of Jesus. Jesus relived all of humanity’s history and in the process fulfilled all the terms of the covenant. He was humanity in one package, and what happened to Him through the biblical principle of corporate personality also happened to us (Rom. 5). “We were there,”⁹—two thousand years ago in the historic event of Christ. Therefore, when He lived right, we lived right (Rom. 5:18, 19); when He died, we all died (2 Cor. 5:14); when He was resurrected, we also experienced a resurrection (Eph. 2:6; Col. 3:1). As certainly as God came to be with man in Christ, so certainly has man gone to be with God in Christ.

Some time ago, two of the world’s most prominent skeptics were West and Littleton, and they were two of the most brilliant intellects of their own or any age. They made fun of Christianity whenever they met. By and by they said: “There are two things we must explode and then we will have the Christian religion all tumbled into the ditch and nothing will be left.” These were the two things: They said they would have to explain away the doctrine that Jesus Christ rose from the dead on the third day as the Scriptures teach, and they would have to explain that wonderful man, the Apostle Paul whose influence was so powerful in the world eighteen centuries even after he died. West said: I will explode the resurrection of Christ and blow it up,” and Littleton said, “I will explain Paul.”

They went their ways, and after weeks and weeks, by appointment they came together again, and Littleton said: “West, what have you to say?” West replied: “Oh, Littleton, I have something wonderful to tell you. When I came to explode the doctrine that Jesus of Nazareth rose from the dead on the third day, I had to be candid; I had to be sincere; I had to be honest; I had to search for my evidence. You may laugh at me Littleton, if you will, but when I looked into it honestly my mind and my deepest soul were convinced that Jesus did rise from the dead, and I prayed to Him and He saved me, and I am His friend.”

⁸ Raoul Dederen, “Atoning Aspect In Christ’s Death,” in *The Sanctuary and The Atonement: Biblical, Historical and Theological Studies*, ed. Arnold V. Wallenkampf and W. Richard Leshner (Washington: Review and Herald, 1981), 302.

⁹ Richard M. Davidson, “You are There,” *New England Pastor*, (Jan/Feb, 2008), p. 9.

Then Littleton answered: "Thank God, West! I have some thing just as wonderful to tell you. When I came to explain that man Paul and get rid of him, I too had to be thorough and candid; I had to search; I had to be true. You will rejoice with me, West, when I tell you that after I had searched and studied about Paul, by and by I found myself down on my knees just as Paul got down on his knees on that Damascus road, and my cry was his: 'Lord, what wilt Thou have me to do?' And I am a Christian also West."

These two outstanding skeptics became two of the world's most noted Christians, and have written two of the noblest apologies of the Christian religion that have ever been penned.

In another affirmation of what God has accomplished in Christ, Paul states that humanity, who "were dead in sins" sit with Jesus in heavenly places (Eph. 2:6). The Christian, though on earth, sits in heavenly places; for we read that "God, who is rich in mercy, for His great love wherewith He loved us, even when we were dead in sins, hath quickened us together with Christ (by grace ye are saved), and hath raised us up together, and made us sit together in heavenly places in Christ Jesus." Eph. 2:4-6.

As over four hundred graduates received their degrees in commencement grove at Pacific Union College last Sunday, hundreds of parents and well-wishers were there to cheer on their candidates. They were taking pictures. They had balloons of celebration. They were throwing tortillas into the air. Each time a student's name was announced by the academic dean, a cheer would arise from the crowd on behalf of their loved one. The whole family was there on the stage in their representative graduate shaking hands with the president of the college and receiving his or her diploma.

Likewise, we are sitting in heavenly places. We have a view of heavenly things. We have not been raised to heavenly places to continue still looking at earth, but in order that our themes of contemplation may be the exalted themes of the life immortal. This is our privilege, now, even while still here in the flesh. We have been as it were taken out of this world, and lifted above into the glorious realm of eternal joy and light and peace; and the Lord now wants us to realize the fact, and open our eyes and ears to take in the glories which this realm affords. Though still on earth, we have been translated, as it were, to heaven itself, that our thoughts may be the thoughts of heaven and our language the language of heaven. The

Lord does not compel us to wait till the last work is done before knowing and seeing something of the celestial Canaan. He is willing that we should know something of it here. He is anxious that we should see and experience now the joys of the life to come.

God shut man out of the literal paradise, lest he should as a sinner put forth his hand and eat of the fruit of the tree of life, and live for ever; but He has never shut man out of the spiritual heaven. He has never withheld from man anything that was for his good. He has never shut away from him the light and joy and peace which heaven knows. On the contrary, He has at infinite cost kept these still within man's reach, and invited and pleaded with him to take them. Though confined bodily to this world of darkness and sin, God never designed that man should give himself up to the influence of its darkness and see nothing but its misery and sin. Enoch the seventh from Adam, walked with God. He had the society of God, the thoughts of God, and all the joys that companionship with God affords. He experienced heaven below; and it is just this that we may do and must do before we know it above.

We have been made to "sit together in heavenly places in Christ Jesus," and all we have to do is to open our eyes and behold what is around us. But we may keep our eyes shut, and still not know where we are; and how pitiable is the condition of the one who has been exalted to heaven, but refuses to open his eyes, and so imagines himself still on earth! No person will know anything of heaven until he is willing to open his eyes. Until he does that, he will never see anything more than he has seen, and his thoughts will never rise above the same low level.

The mission of Jesus Christ is "to open the blind eyes." Isa. 42:7. He opens the eyes that are blind to spiritual things. He is the light of the world; and in Him we see. We cannot see when we are not in the light. So likewise we cannot see heavenly things outside of Him. We "sit together in heavenly places" not without Him, but in Him. To be in Him and abide in Him, we must believe. So in order to see, we must have faith. People commonly reverse this and think they must first see in order to have faith; but such is not the scriptural way. By faith we abide in Him, and then, being in the light, we see.

If we try to see first, we shall not be able to do it; for we are in the blackness of darkness before we have faith. What we have to do is to believe, and then He will take care of the seeing. Believe His word, believe all His promises, believe that He has given you all that He

says He has, that He has blessed you with “all spiritual blessings in Christ,”—believe them strongly enough to claim them, and you will know that you are raised up to sit in heavenly places in Him, and that henceforth heavenly views and heavenly joys are yours.

Recently a fellow Christian related to me how being introduced to Christ lifted his view of life from the lowlands of this earth to the heavenly realm. His language was uncouth. His habits were filthy and defiling. His social relations were also askew. But seeing Jesus changed his attitude and his very soul was converted by a divine power from without. It was only this that could produce such dramatic effects in his life. By choice he aligned his will with that of Omnipotence. God’s miracles of heavenly grace were wrought within him.

Again, all this reflects what God accomplished for us without our asking, repenting, confessing or even accepting. Simply put, when we think of our salvation, our first thoughts should not be about what God is accomplishing in us through our faith relationship with Him; but what He has accomplished outside of us, through the faithfulness of Jesus (Rom. 3:21-25). Without doubt, Jesus’ faithfulness to God existed, and continues to exist, whether or not we accept or acknowledge it. There is indeed a dimension of the gospel which is a finished, completed reality that no effort of ours can add to or diminish.

However, in order for this objective reality to become effective in our lives, it requires our acceptance. The New Testament also speaks subjectively regarding the *in-Christ* reality. Our acceptance of the objective reality does not cause it to exist in the first place, no more than our sitting in the sunlight causes the sun to exist. Receiving should never be confused with achieving.

The subjective dimension of the *in-Christ* theme describes our response to, acceptance of, and participation in what God has accomplished for us in Christ. The peace of God guards the hearts and minds of those who are in Christ (Phil. 2:1). Encouragement resides in Christ (Phil. 2:1). Believers are one in Christ (Gal. 3:28). Believers are regenerated, renewed, and justified by the Spirit of Christ (Titus 2:5-7). By uniting together, believers are one body in Christ. Urbanus is “our fellow worker in Christ” (Rom. 16:9). In Him we live and move and have our being (Acts 17:28).

We know this, that as we breathe we are taking in the air provided by God meant to sustain our life. As our eyes greet the sunlight, it is

the light provided by Him in order to maintain and give of His life. As we eat the food He gives, it is the God-ordained means by which He sustains His life in us and that gives the strength that we need. So all the life we live, we live by God. “In Him we live and move and have our being,” said Paul. The life is the light, and the light lightens every man that cometh into the world. So the life of Christ is the life of every living soul.

Our response means there is a real union between Christ and for the believer that translates into Christ-like actions. This is what God is doing in us. In this union the believer’s actions are motivated, empowered, and defined by the indwelling Christ (2 Cor. 5:14; Gal. 2:20). No longer is the law just a code, but, more importantly, it is now a person.¹⁰ In Christ, the Christian does not have a road map; he has a personal guide. This guide not only directs according to the principles enunciated in the Bible, but whereas no rule book can prescribe every twist and turn in life, Jesus is also present through His other self, that is, the Holy Spirit, to instruct in the myriads of life’s details not explicitly outlined in the Bible. Christ is not only the gift of God (grace), He is the living law of God. The grace of God teaches us to obey (Titus 2:11, 12). The *in-Christ* theme encapsulates the “Christian’s new environment.” We indeed live and move and have our being in Him (Acts 17:28).

God wishes to save all. So many hinder His gift of eternal life in Christ. The problem with us as humans is that we tend to focus more on our acceptance of the gift, namely, our faith response, and tend to invest it with meritorial value, where salvation is concerned. Needless to say, the *meritorial* cause of salvation is not what God is doing in us, but what He has done for us objectively in Christ.

Unless this important distinction is made, we will be left with a Christ-centered legalism—a salvation that is partially dependent on what God has done for us, and partially on what we do in response; namely, acceptance, faith, confession, good works, etc. Paul reminds that we are not only justified by the faithfulness of Jesus, but by the faithfulness of Jesus *apart* from works of law (Gal. 2:16; Rom. 3:20-25). Works here includes even those works that are accomplished through the Holy Spirit. Simply put, we are not saved by our acceptance of Jesus.

¹⁰ Understood from another angle, this is the fulfillment of the new covenant promise to have the law written on the heart (Heb. 8:7-13).

Because of this objective *in-Christ* formula, we can have a perfect assurance of salvation, as, objectively in Christ, we are always complete. God's action in Christ is complete, perfect, and meets all the conditions for salvation. In this assurance we stand firm in Christ.

A little girl found on the street in a basket was taken to a hospital where she lived for a few years. The people named her "Jane Doe Lost." When she was still quite young she became a Christian, trusting in Jesus as her Saviour, and He gave her a new heart and made her a new creature. Then she wanted a new name also. She went to the superintendent of the home and said, "Please, don't call me Jane Doe Lost any more. I used to be Jane Doe Lost, but I am no longer. Jesus has found me and now I want to be called Mary Found."