

NORTHERN LIGHT

Digest

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“In Christ”: The Christian’s New Identity

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Some Christian thinkers call “being-in-Christ” the hallmark of St. Paul’s teaching. Many religions, prophets, soothsayers, philosophers seek after “God” in some form or another but for Paul the Christian hope and daily living are much more intensely focused. It is new life in Christ. Hence such phrases scattered through his letters

as 2 Corinthians 5:17, “Therefore, if anyone is *in Christ*, he is a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come.”

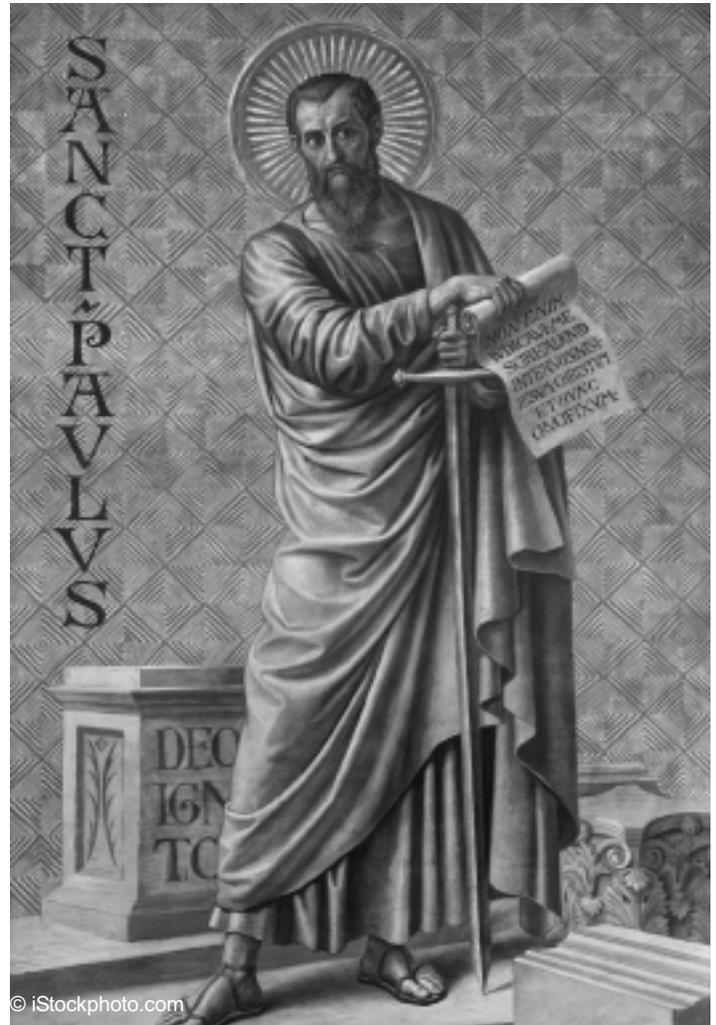
The unorthodox Christian theologian Albert Schweitzer summarized Paul’s thoughts on this subject:

“For him [Paul], believers are redeemed by entering already, through the union with Christ, by means of a mystical dying and rising again with Him during the continuance of the natural world-era into a supernatural state of existence, this state being that which they are to possess in the Kingdom of God. Through Christ we are removed out of this world and transferred into the state of existence proper to the kingdom of God, notwithstanding the fact that it has not yet appeared” (*The Mysticism of Paul the Apostle*, page 380).

That is a statement well worth unpacking.

A key here is that Paul typically held two aspects of Christ’s teaching together in a productive tension—Kingdom living now and full Kingdom life yet to come. The well-travelled practical Paul was also a visionary and a mystic. He had more visions and revelations than any of his parishioners (2 Corinthians 12:1-7).

But how does new identity in Christ really work and how does it fit in with what St. Paul considered the most important event in human history—the resurrection of Jesus Christ?



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The Heavenly Realms Already?

For starters, these themes surcharge such basic texts as Romans 6:1-5,

“Or don’t you know that all of us who were baptized *into Christ Jesus* were baptized into his death? We were buried with him through baptism into death in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, we too may live a

new life. If we have been united with him like this in his death, we will also be united with him in his resurrection...Now if we died with Christ, we believe that we will also live with him.”

This is classic Paul. For him the resurrection was the hinge doctrine of Christianity. Not only were Christians symbolically buried with Christ in baptism but they were symbolically *raised* with him as well. Only it goes a bit deeper than mere symbolism. There is a hard bite of ultimate reality to this exalted theologizing. He develops this theme further in his letter to the Ephesians, chapter two, verse six:

“But because of his great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, *made us alive with Christ* even when we were dead in trespasses—it is by grace you have been saved. And God raised us up with Christ and seated us with him in the heavenly realms in Christ Jesus. “

What did he say? “*We are seated in the heavenly realms in Christ?*”

How could this be? Well, again, Paul is not speaking here in a totally literal sense. He is speaking somewhat metaphorically and even mystically. He tells us that through God’s saving power demonstrated in Christ’s resurrection we already enjoy participation through the Holy Spirit in the heavenly realms where God and Christ dwell. This is one of the benefits of life “in Christ” and of his resurrection and ascension. Being “in Christ” makes all this possible.

The “Already/Not Yet” Factor

The resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ was not just the greatest event in history but also a vital guiding principle for everything the believer can hope and expect here below. “In Christ” is a mystical phrase yet one that penetrates deeper than mere symbol or analogy. It links up with the other “out of this world” phrase, “seated in the heavenly realms.” Note these comments on Ephesians 2:6 from Max Turner in *The New Bible Commentary: 21st Century Version*:

“To say we have been made alive with Christ appears to be shorthand for saying ‘we shall be resurrected with Christ to new-creation life,’ and we may speak of that *as though it were an already accomplished event* because first, the decisive event of [Christ’s] resurrection lies in the past and secondly, we already begin to participate in aspects of that new-creation life in our present union with him” (page 1229).

We are united with Christ through the Holy Spirit and the deeper thinking behind these grand and exalted concepts are only decoded to the believer by the Spirit. Note Francis Foulkes comments on Ephesians 2:6 in *The Tyndale New Testament Commentaries*:

“In Ephesians 1:3 the apostle has said that God has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places. Now he says more specifically that our life has come to be there, enthroned with Christ...Humanity, by virtue of Christ’s conquest of sin and death and by his exaltation, is lifted ‘from the deepest hell to heaven itself’ (Calvin). Citizenship is now in heaven (Phil. 3:20); and there, and not under the limits imposed by the world...true life is found” (page 82).

Our Union with Christ

Notice John Stott’s remarks on Ephesians 2:6 in his book, *The Message of Ephesians*:

“What excites our amazement, however, is that now Paul is not writing about Christ but about us. He is affirming not that God quickened, raised and seated Christ, but that he quickened, raised and seated us with Christ...Fundamental to New Testament Christianity is this concept of the union of God’s people with Christ. [They possess] new solidarity as a people who are ‘in Christ.’ By virtue of their union with Christ they have actually shared in his resurrection, ascension, and session.”

By “session” here Stott refers theologically to the present reign of Christ over all creation (Revelation 5:12-13). Nor, says Stott, is all this talk of our reigning with Christ a piece of “meaningless Christian mysticism.” It is instead a *meaningful* piece of Christian mysticism which goes even beyond that. Stott adds:

“In the ‘heavenly places,’ the unseen world of spiritual reality, in which the principalities and powers operate (3:10; 6:12) and in which Christ reigns supreme (1:20), there God has blessed his people in Christ (1:3), and there he has seated them with Christ...It bears witness to a living experience, that Christ has given us on the one hand a new life and on the other a new victory. We were dead, but have been made spiritually alive and alert. We were in captivity, but have been enthroned.”

These expositors are right. There is more than mere symbolism here—as exotic as this teaching first appears. What Paul is explaining is the implication of our new life in Christ. Typical of the New Testament, there are at least three practical things to think about in this connection.

The Practical Implications

First of all, Christians are “as good as there,” in reference to their salvation (Revelation 5:9-10). Christians who are “in Christ” have been “covered” by Christ. They take on his death, burial, resurrection and ascension and can be said to be already in some sense living with him in the heavenly places. This teaching was not meant to be a “pie in the sky” teaser. It was originally written to Christians living in very dire straits in the corrupt cities they inhabited, cities where death from the Roman sword was a very grave possibility. And especially when we consider that most people at the time lived to be only about 40 or 45 years old.

Thus, Paul lifts his reader’s spirits with a further thinking out of the core doctrine of the Faith—the resurrection of Christ. Being “in Christ” means that when God looks at us he does not see our sins. He sees Christ. There is no more encouraging teaching than that. This is reemphasized in Colossians 3: 3, “For you died and life is now hidden with God in Christ.”

Secondly, being “in Christ” means Christians live in two different realms—the physical world of everyday reality and what Stott calls the “unseen world” of spiritual reality. This has implications. We are to live balanced lives. We bear primary allegiance to the Kingdom of God and its values on the one hand but, on the other, are not to be so heavenly minded that we are no earthly good. It’s a tightrope and every Christian needs help from God the Holy Spirit to walk it securely.



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Christ's resurrection and ascension powerfully affects the Christian world view.

Thirdly, being "in Christ" means we are trophies of God's grace. If God has done all this for us, has in some senses already inducted us into the heavenly realms through Christ's sacrifice (Hebrews 10:19-22), this means we are to live as ambassadors for Christ. Francis Foulkes puts it this way:

"The purpose of God for his church, as Paul came to understand it, reaches beyond itself, beyond the salvation, the enlightenment and the re-creation of individuals, beyond its unity and fellowship, beyond even its witness to the world. The church is to be the exhibition to the whole creation of the wisdom and love and grace of God in Christ" (page 82).

How true. Being "in Christ," being given new life in Christ, having our sins hidden to God the Father through identification with Christ, all this means we are to exhibit the Christ-like life to the people we meet. We Christians may march to a different drummer but we are to have a Christ-like concern for the people who share this physical life with us. God has displayed his resurrection power to us not so we can walk around with our heads in the clouds but to be a daily demonstration of God's goodness, to show by our good works that he exists and that he cares mightily for every person on this globe.

Christ's resurrection and ascension powerfully affects the Christian world view. It challenges us to live out our new identity in the real world of human experience.

By Neil Earle

(Canadian-born assistant pastor Neil Earle's website is at asecondlook.info)

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**Canadian Pastors' and Elders' Conference in Toronto, Ontario
August 9-11, 2018.**

Just over 90 attended the first Pastors' and Elders' conference in four years organized by GCI Canada. It was a time for the leadership of GCI Canada to renew old friendships and to create new ones.

Special guests at the conference were Joseph and Tammy Tkach, as well as Gary and Cathy Deddo from the Grace Communion International office in the U.S.

Each day started with a time of worship and reflection directed by Gordon Wilkinson from the Ottawa congregation.

Gary and Cathy were the main speakers at the conference where they discussed the following:

- Building the church out of relationship to Jesus Christ, who is Lord of All, creation and redemption.
- The importance of living in fellowship under the Word of God, Living and Written.
- Having our identity in Jesus Christ.
- Becoming who we are in Jesus Christ.
- The Secular worldview and how it diverges from Christian faith and understanding.
- How we can share our faith with those who are willing to listen and are looking for an alternative to the Secular worldview.

In addition to a discussion of the above topics the conference was a time to honour those who will soon be retiring after many years of service with GCI.

Joseph Tkach will soon be stepping down as the international president of the denomination. He will be replaced by Greg Williams at the beginning of 2019. In his presentation, "Looking Out My Backdoor," he reflected on his life growing up in our fellowship and the changes he has seen during those many years. He also gave some background to the events that occurred to facilitate the enor-

mous doctrinal changes that happened when his father, Joseph Tkach Sr., was president of our denomination. Finally, he spoke about his feelings about retiring and his desire to continue to connect with his church family here in Canada in the future.

Just before his presentation Joseph was given a Team Canada Olympic jersey with his last name and the number "one" on the back—as a memento for his years of service to Canadian members. (Many may know he is a big hockey fan, and a Chicago Blackhawks supporter).

The conference was also a time to say goodbye to Gary Moore and his wife Wendy, after their 45 years of service to the churches in Canada. (Gary will be retired at the end of August.)

For three years Gary pastored Cornwall, Ontario and Plattsburgh New York, then spent 7 years living in Fredericton pastoring the New Brunswick churches, followed by 4 ½ years pastoring Halifax/Digby in Nova Scotia. That was followed by 3 ½ years in Edmonton, and then the move to BC to serve as national director for the church in Canada in 1997.

Gary mentioned that he felt blessed and privileged to have experienced the life he has had. He explained that the journey from a more legalistic approach to Christianity to one firmly anchored in the grace of God in Christ has been a wonderful experience.

In his retirement Gary hopes to continue to serve God and his people, in a more supportive role, as long as he has the energy and health to do so.

The final day of the conference saw myself introduced as the new national director of GCI Canada, along with Steve Posiak as the new western Canada ministry superintendent. Kathleen Horwood was also commissioned as the assistant pastor of the Battleford, Saskatoon and Tisdale SK congregations. (Her duties also include being the new Canadian office manager.) Prayers were offered for myself, my wife Averil, Kathleen and Steve.

In addition, a presentation was made to Gary and Wendy Moore that included a photo album of the congregations as well as a gas gift card to enable them to travel across Canada in the future, as a thank you from the Canadian congregations.

This was followed by a gift presentation to Tammy Tkach and Wendy Moore for their years of service to the women of the denomination.

After these presentations I gave a short introduction to my Christian journey and my desire as we go forward, to enable the ministry in our church and the local congregations to be the hands and feet of Jesus in their local communities.

The conference ended in a communion service directed by Steve Posiak and Bill Rabey (Eastern ministry superintendent), which was accompanied by Gordon Wilkinson.

By Bill Hall