

‘IN CHRIST’

IN 1892 the appearance of Deissmann's exhaustive analysis of the Pauline formula 'In Christ' startled the theological world of his day, and it is no exaggeration to say that the ripples have not yet subsided. Successive interpreters of St. Paul have wrestled with the meaning of the phrase and its significance in the Pauline corpus. Some have contended sharply with one another, as Principal James Denney and Professor A. S. Peake, whether it should be understood mystically or morally. Others have found it to be the key to the deadlock reached by orthodox theologians in presenting the heart of Paul's theology in *experimental* terms rather than *legal*. All of us are indebted to such writers as H. A. A. Kennedy, C. Anderson Scott, J. S. Stewart, and A. M. Hunter for their full and lucid treatment of this theme.

The phrase itself is used 164 times by St. Paul, chiefly in the Epistles of the Imprisonment, possibly as a corrective against the idea that he was in the hands of Nero. Wherever he was, and whatever he was, he was still 'in Christ', prisoner though he was of the Emperor. Under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit Paul used this term to interpret his position as a Christian, and to do justice to the encounter with the risen Lord, which was foundational to all that followed. This simple, yet profound phrase, means so much more than *Christian*, although it may mean no more than that in Philemon 16. 'Both in the flesh, and in the Lord' may be only another way of saying both as a man and as a Christian.

I.

The phrase is equivalent to a similar expression 'in the Spirit'. Indeed it might appear as though *the risen Christ is equated with the Holy Ghost* in the Pauline Epistles. Certainly the identification is actually made in 2 Cor. iii. 17: 'The Lord is that Spirit.' Yet the two personalities remain distinct in the New Testament, but hardly so in our experience. The apostles after Pentecost recognized the lineaments of the glorified Christ in the indwelling Presence of the Holy Spirit. Theology has tended to treat the doctrines of the Redeemer and the Sanctifier under different heads and to divide asunder what is united in the believer's experience. In much the same way as the early Christians could only say 'God' when they declared, by Christ 'we have access by one Spirit unto the Father' (Eph. ii. 18). Thus the relationship of Christ and the Spirit are inseparable in our union with God. Dr. Wheeler Robinson has suggested that only in the acceptance of Jesus as Lord and Saviour by the believer does the personality of the Spirit of God become real and understandable. 'If the Lord gave personality to the Spirit,' he affirms, 'the Spirit gave ubiquity to the Lord.' A Sunday School teacher who asked a little refugee 'Who is the Holy Ghost?' was astonished by the reply, 'The Twin Brother of Jesus.' Like Peter, flesh and blood had not revealed it unto him. To be 'in the Spirit' is the same experience as to be 'in Christ'.

John Calvin, commenting on 'the body is one and hath many members', says simply that *St. Paul calls Christ the Church*. For a long time Protestants have been so afraid of the ordinance usurping the place of its Lord that they

have belittled its value. And as Dr. James Denney once shrewdly remarked, they have learned the lesson only too well. 'We become related to Christ singly,' argues Dr. James A. Mackay, 'but we cannot live in Christ solitarily.' The Church of God is fundamentally a fellowship of forgiven men who are united to Christ by faith. This is much more than an organization and an institution. We enter the Church through incorporation into Christ, and not Christ through membership in the Church.

There is also a cosmic significance in the phrase, 'in Adam all die . . . in Christ shall all be made alive' (1 Cor. xv. 22). *Christ is the head of a new race.* The head of the old humanity federally was Adam. By nature we are all linked to the father of a stock which is sinful and fallen. By the new birth we are united to Christ who is the head of the new humanity. This idea of racial solidarity is hard for the modern mind to grasp, partly through the emphasis on individualism in the West, and partly through our insistence on personal faith in Christ Jesus as Saviour. By divine decree Jesus is the head of the family of God, a new stock has sprung from the stem of Jesse, and all who are grafted into that root share in the benefits of eternal life. This concept of being made one with Another is still imperfectly realized by the followers of the last Adam. 'Ye are all one in Christ Jesus' (Gal. iii. 28). Divisions of race, sex, and class disappear in the all-embracing unity in Christ Jesus.

It is so easy, however, to stress these larger aspects and lose the more intimate aspect of the Christian life. *The believer is one with his Lord.* If we have tried to communicate something of the deep meaning of community in St. Paul, we must not do so at the expense of *commitment.* Union with Christ is no mere formula to describe a mystic experience, and therefore unreal and high sounding, but it is essentially experimental in character. The mystic and the moral are bound together in such a way that excessive mysticism cannot develop at the expense of ethical conduct. Union with Christ means entering by faith into the experience of salvation in all its fulness. God reveals Himself, convicts the sinner of his need, draws him to Christ, heals and saves through the operation of His Spirit. This humiliating insight into self and into the all-sufficiency of Christ Jesus is also the beginning of sanctification, and the goal is glorification.

Some may feel that this strand of truth is nothing more than a strand and limited to high moments of bliss similar to the mystics of old in their ascent through various states of mind to that of elation and adoration. Evidently St. Paul had his own share of these moments of exaltation as he so humbly records in 2 Cor. xii. 'A man in Christ' is caught up, raptured, to the third heaven, but the valley that follows with its sanctifying thorn, is lit by the knowledge of divine grace to transform human weakness. To be 'in Christ' is the norm and not the abnormal state, not necessarily ecstatic in character but the radiation of new life in conscious union with Christ Jesus. Salvation was a sharing in a completely new kind of life which transformed the ordinary situations with their downward pull as the power of the risen Lord was known. Christ Jesus was no posthumous influence, but a living Person, a contemporaneous Saviour, alive for evermore, invading human life to deliver from fear and bondage.

To this modern generation this emphasis on union with our glorified Lord appears to be the *heart* of Paul's religion. 'I have been crucified with Christ: yet I live; and yet it is no longer the I, but Christ that lives in me: and that life which I now live in the flesh I live by faith, faith which is resting in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me' (Gal. ii. 20). This emphasis may be due to the modern habit of seeking to compress everything into a small compass. On every hand folk want the 'potted variety' and the 'digest quantity' in their spiritual diet. Only thus can truth win a hearing amid the hustle and bustle of contemporary society. Hence the popularity of such a formula as Professor H. R. Mackintosh's dictum, 'Union with Christ is a brief name for all that the Apostles meant by salvation.'

So far we have been concerned with the theological implications of this aspect of St. Paul's teaching. It is now necessary to enquire whether this truth is *preachable*, or whether it is too abstract to capture the imagination and stir the heart. If theology is worthy of the name it should be capable of presentation and win the assent of mind and heart. Otherwise it is no message at all but an abstraction. This formula *in itself* fails the test, but allied to the vivid figures used by St. Paul it shines with new meaning. We must

ever beware against paying lip service to the apostle, as so many of his interpreters have done, without undergoing that crushing encounter with the risen Lord as he did on the road to Damascus. As P. T. Forsyth has put it with his usual brilliance, 'the liberal theologian lacks one thing that orthodoxy had and still has — power.'

II.

Dr. James Black has suggestively declared that 'Preaching is the natural overflow of a man's religion'. To that we must now turn. Christ is the redeemed man's new environment and five figures are used to illustrate it. They provide the key to the interpretation of this illuminating phrase.

i. *A new world* (2 Cor. v. 17)

'If any man be in Christ, he is a new creature,' or as the margin renders it, 'there is a new creation.' The text sets forth the glory of conversion. Saul of Tarsus had Jewish ancestry, Rabbinic training, Hellenistic contact, and Roman citizenship, but these were powerless in themselves to save his soul. The new creature with its sense of being forgiven, with its exhilarating sense of liberty over the bondage of sin, with its purpose and awareness of future glory owed nothing to inheritance and environment and everything to Christ Jesus. These forces prepared the way for Christ by showing their powerlessness to save, and by actually promoting sin. As St. Augustine expressed it so pithily, 'The Law is given that Grace may be sought: Grace is given that the Law may be fulfilled.'

The decisive change came with the encounter on the Damascus Road. It was the same skin but a new man inside. The margin suggests a further distinction. To be in Christ introduces us to a new world: 'there is a new creation.'

Heaven above is softer blue,
Earth around is sweeter green;
Something lives in every hue,
Christless eyes have never seen:
Birds with gladder songs o'erflow,
Flowers with deeper beauties shine,
Since I know, as now I know,
I am His, and He is mine.

St. Paul had entered into that new world through Christ. This meant a changed attitude toward life and death, self and society. Like the blind man whose eyes Jesus opened he saw a new world around him, a world crying out for the good news; and the cross seemed to point to the four quarters of the compass, and its arms embrace the whole wide world. Hence the consuming missionary interest of the apostle.

ii. *A new soil* (Col. ii. 6, 7)

The Christian is rooted in Christ and from Him draws nourishment and anchorage. To be 'in Christ' means three things here. To receive Him in the sufficiency of all His offices; the Messiah of fulfilled prophecy and eternal purpose, i.e. *the Christ*; the Saviour of a lost and condemned race, i.e. *Jesus*, He shall save His people from their sins; *Lord* of angels and men, of spiritual and material worlds, of history and providence, i.e. of the very nature of the Godhead, and therefore sovereign in the apostle's heart. The tenses here are significant. The reception is in the aorist, rooted in the perfect, and builded in the present tense. To walk in Christ means to share in the vigour that He imparts to daily conduct and to follow His example in the common things of life. The nourishment which is required for such energetic Christianity comes from Him. The figure of the building points to character, and reminds us of the slow and painful task before each Christian, of shaping his life amid many setbacks for that eternal glory that ever lies beyond, beckoning and heartening, as course is laid upon course. The secret of continuance is to be 'in Christ'.

iii. *A new atmosphere* (Rom. viii. 9)

Two parallel phrases here are closely bound together — 'in the Spirit' and 'in Christ'. The Spirit makes Christ Jesus real to us. He mediates all Christ's gifts to us. The Christian lives and moves in this *pneuma* element.

It is the very breath of his life and without it he must perish. As the body is in the atmosphere so is the soul in the Spirit. What a difference the air makes to activity! The bird can live only in the air and the fish in water and the Christian in Christ. 'For to me to live is Christ' (Phil. i. 21). Christ is the redeemed man's new environment.

iv. *A new goal* (Col. i. 28)

'Perfect in Christ' 'every man perfect in Christ' 'that we may present every man perfect in Christ.' This was the astounding aim of the apostle. What a decisive challenge to much modern religion! Yet how humiliating it is! Compare it with the lower levels of Christian life current among us and masquerading as the real thing! Without the aid of Christ dwelling within us this goal would lead us to blank despair. His shining example would be cold and remote. In no way would it cleanse the conscience or break the stranglehold of sin upon the soul. Ethical example alone makes religion a grievous burden to be borne, leading to one disappointment after another, but the power of 'Christ in you' imparts new vigour, it gives wings for flight, and liberty amid the strongest of habits, and ability to conquer the most persistent of sins.

v. *A new attitude* (Rom. vi)

All that has gone before in this study is summarized in one passage which deals with the moment-by-moment realization of the truth of union with Christ. It is a figure not taken from the Mystery cults as some would have us rashly believe, but from the most eventful experiences of the Saviour Himself. We are to reproduce in spiritual history the two overwhelming events by which Jesus passed into an endless life. The believer is to be identified with his Lord in death and resurrection. Baptism by immersion was a close parallel to this downward movement into death symbolized by the plunge beneath the waters of a river, and the upward movement as the head emerged from depths to a new sphere of life. But the attitude did not begin with the rite nor cease with it! What happened once for all in His experience with decisive finality can be reproduced in us by constant *reckoning* of the old nature as dead and the new nature as alive unto God through the operation of the Spirit in union with Christ. The impassable gulf between the old and the new is thus symbolized and realized in this act. By stressing *burial* the apostle indicates the final nature of this break with the past and with sin. There is an awful completeness about Christ's sacrifice. So the Christian is called by his conversion and baptism to cross the great divide and remain for ever on the right side of it. Converts from other religions realize this fact, as no doubt the first century believers did, and regard 'the waters of separation' in a way no Westerner can do so today.

If the cost appears to be heavy the compensation is double; alive unto God for evermore! This explains the contagious joy of the early Christians as they entered into the victory of Christ over sin, over the fear of death and evil powers, and into freedom from the thralldom of their slave environment. Whatever they might be 'in the flesh' they were sons of God 'in Christ'. Eternal life had dawned upon them. As the Fife labourer said to R. L. Stevenson, 'Him that had aye something ayont, need never be weary.' This proved to be the nerve of Christianity with its rapture of the forward view. Christ was risen from the dead never to die again, and identified with Him the believer shared in that glorious experience and inheritance.

The key word in the chapter is 'reckon'. This is the trumpet call ringing out with such strident clarity. When temptation assails and the old life asserts its former mastery, then we are to realize the power of Christ by reckoning the old nature as dead and buried, and the new nature as triumphant because His resurrection life flows into our souls.

To those who felt that this type of religion was simply high-flying without any corresponding moral fibre the apostle shows that this union with Christ is the one safeguard against abuse. To shelter under Christ's imputed righteousness means to accept the same attitude toward sin. Moreover the power to perform what God commanded was there. United with Christ in a deep intimacy the apostle had not ceased to strive for perfection, but he had come within reach of it. The desire for life in ever greater fulness rose up within him. 'For to me to live is Christ, to die is gain.'