

THE MARVEL
OF BEING
IN CHRIST

COMPACT EXPOSITORY PULPIT COMMENTARY SERIES

THE MARVEL
OF BEING
IN CHRIST

*Adoring God's Provision of
New Life in the Spirit*

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The Miracle of Spiritual Sight: Affirming the Transforming Doctrine of Regeneration

Introduction

I count all things to be loss in view of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whom I have suffered the loss of all things, and count them but rubbish so that I may gain Christ, and may be found in Him, not having a righteousness of my own derived from the Law, but that which is through faith in Christ, the righteousness which comes from God on the basis of faith.

PHILIPPIANS 3:9

There are always times in the life of a believer where the Spirit of God reveals some new insight into a biblical truth that transforms his thinking, redirects his will, and animates his worship to new heights of heartfelt praise. By this I'm not referring to some extrabiblical, private revelation that claims the Holy Spirit speaks to a person directly—the lethal legacy of the Charismatic movement. Nor am I referring to some special illumination whereby the Holy Spirit reveals some hidden meaning

beyond the author's original intent in writing a passage that can be immediately understood. This opens the door to false teaching (2 Tim. 2:3-4) and triggers divine judgment (Rev. 22:18-19).

What I'm describing is simply *a more accurate understanding of what the Word has clearly stated*—an enhanced apprehension and appreciation of something profound, but never hidden—something that causes one to say, "Thank you Lord. I was ignorant and confused. I never saw this before, but it was here all along. How exciting!" I experienced this as a young man when the Spirit of God helped me gain new insight into the marvelous doctrine of the *believer's intimate spiritual union with the Lord Jesus Christ*.

I have observed that the vital importance of this sacred mystery remains largely neglected in our current era of evangelical superficiality. As Strong states,

The majority of printed systems of doctrine . . . contain no chapter or section on Union with Christ, and the majority of Christians much more frequently think of Christ as a Savior outside of them, than as a Savior who dwells within. This comparative neglect of the doctrine is doubtless a reaction from the

exaggerations of a false mysticism. But there is great need of rescuing the doctrine from neglect.¹

It is my prayer and purpose in this book to help the reader develop a deeper grasp of what it means to be “in Christ,” that together we might embrace this intimate oneness more fully by faith and experience more of the confidence, power, and soul-satisfying joy of the presence of our exalted Redeemer. Charles Spurgeon said it best: “There is no joy in this world like union with Christ! The more we can feel it, the happier we are, whatever our circumstances.”²

1

The Nature of Union with Christ

The glory which You have given Me I have given to them, that they may be one, just as We are one; I in them and You in Me, that they may be perfected in unity, so that the world may know that You sent Me, and loved them, even as You have loved Me.

JOHN 17:21-23

As a teenager growing up in the late 1960s, I was heavily influenced by the “Do this, don’t do that” form of Christianity. I was confronted with endless rules and rituals based upon the unique preferences of whatever Christian group I happened to be around at the time (which, of course, varied greatly). I was convinced that only Spirit-filled people lived this way and that they alone

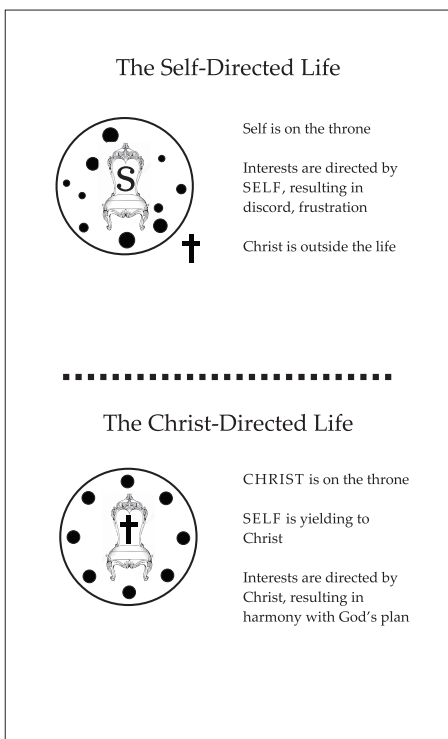
possessed His gifts and power; and I truly wanted to join their ranks. So I tried my best to rigidly conform, at least on the outside. But I increasingly felt the sting of an accusing conscience and the shame of hypocrisy when I broke some code of conduct; or maybe kept it, but hated every minute of it. Instead of gaining more power, I felt just the opposite. My legalism only offered an illusion of spirituality. Like many others, I was a lot of sizzle but no steak.

Added to this was the significant influence of older friends I loved and respected who were heavily involved with Campus Crusade for Christ. They taught me the famous “Four Spiritual Laws” written by the founder of Campus Crusade, Bill Bright. Perhaps you know them:

- Spiritual Law #1: God loves you and offers a wonderful plan for your life.
- Spiritual Law #2: Man is sinful and separated from God. Therefore, he cannot know and experience God’s love and plan for his life.
- Spiritual Law #3: Jesus Christ is God’s only provision for man’s sin. Through Him you can know and experience God’s love and plan for your life.
- Spiritual Law #4: We must individually receive Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord; then we can

know and experience God's love and plan for our lives.

I still remember a misleading diagram (below) used to illustrate the fourth law. Although I didn't know it at the time, it communicated some erroneous theology that stunted my spiritual growth.



Though well meaning, I was unwittingly soliciting Christ to sit on the throne of my life through religious rule-keeping. I wanted Christ in my “circle,” not outside of it. I wanted “The Christ-Directed Life” so my “interests [would be] directed by Christ, resulting in harmony with God’s plan.” I saw myself as the carnal Christian who needed to yield himself more to the Holy Spirit to *gain more filling*, but I was never sure how. Without stating it directly, I secretly wanted to attain more righteousness so God would be more pleased with me—so pleased with me that He would promote me to the status of super-saint. I wanted more Spirit filling so I could have more spiritual power. “After all,” I thought, “who wants to be just a run-of-the-mill, mediocre, powerless, fruitless Christian (commonly referred to as a *carnal* Christian) whose interests are out of whack and whose life is not in harmony with God’s plan?”

But what I failed to understand is that because of God’s gift of grace in saving me, Christ was no longer *outside* me, He was *in* me, and I was *in* Him! Contrary to the diagram, I didn’t see myself as a branch attached to the vine that is Christ and therefore, because of Him alone, perfectly capable of bearing fruit (John 15:5). I didn’t grasp the astounding reality that the “Father of our Lord Jesus Christ

. . . has blessed us with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places in Christ” (Eph. 1:3). I didn’t understand that I was already “a temple of the living God” (2 Cor. 6:16). I didn’t understand “that His divine power has granted to us everything pertaining to life and godliness” (2 Peter 1:3), or that I was to “(strive) according to His power, which mightily works within me” (Col. 1:29) because He alone “is able to do exceeding abundantly beyond all that we ask or think, according to the power that works within us” (Eph. 3:20).

Frankly, I didn’t understand the most basic aspect of salvation: *union with Christ*—“that there is . . . no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus” (Rom. 8:1); that “if any man is in Christ, *he is a new creature*” (2 Cor. 5:17). I didn’t fully comprehend how *His life alone* could satisfy the righteous demands of the Law, *not His plus mine*—consistent with Paul’s desire to “be found in Him, not having a righteousness of my own derived from *the Law*, but that which is through faith in Christ, the righteousness which *comes* from God on the basis of faith” (Phil. 3:9).

I simply did not realize that God no longer sees my sin, instead, He sees the righteousness of His beloved Son, “for [I] have died and [my] life is hidden with Christ in God” (Col. 3:3); “For He has clothed

me with garments of salvation, He has wrapped me with a robe of righteousness” (Isa. 61:10). Therefore, *I was already in permanent possession of all that is His.*

Baptized by the Spirit into Christ

Sadly, I had such an inflated view of my own righteousness and abilities to impress (manipulate) God that I was unwittingly making a mockery of Paul’s words in 1 Corinthians 5:21 where he says, “He made Him who knew no sin *to be* sin on our behalf, so that we might become the righteousness of God in Him.” At a most fundamental level, I failed to grasp the miracle of the new birth when I was baptized by the Holy Spirit *into* Christ and what that really meant—which is summarized by the apostle Paul when he said:

How shall we who died to sin still live in it?
Or do you not know that all of us who have
been baptized into Christ Jesus have been
baptized into His death? Therefore we have
been buried with Him through baptism into
death, so that as Christ was raised from the
dead through the glory of the Father, so we
too might walk in newness of life. For if we
have become united with Him in the likeness

of His death, certainly we shall also be in the likeness of His resurrection, knowing this, that our old self was crucified with Him, in order that our body of sin might be done away with, so that we would no longer be slaves to sin; for he who has died is freed from sin.

(Rom. 6:2-7)

Once I began to realize Christ was not outside of me, separated from me, wanting me to shape up so He could come into my life and really take it over so I could experience the “abundant life” (as my friends called it), everything changed. I was both humbled and relieved to know that *all the righteousness I would ever need to be pleasing to God, and all the Spirit filling I foolishly thought I could acquire was already my permanent possession by grace alone, through faith alone, in Christ alone.* With this, the words of the apostle John took on new meaning to me where he says, “By this we know that we abide in Him and He in us, because He has given us of His Spirit” (1 John 4:13).

Now, it’s important to note: *this did not translate into a license to sin.* In fact, just the opposite was true. My heart (like countless others) was animated to pursue godliness like never before as I began to grasp the magnitude of God’s gracious gift of *Christ Himself* and as I began to fully realize that I am

“complete in Him” (Col. 2:10). Knowing that without Him I can do nothing (John 15:5), I had a passion for holiness for all the right reasons. God was not waiting to be *impressed*, but to be *worshipped*. Christ was no longer a power source to be *earned*, but to be *enjoyed*. I finally understood the heading of Chapter One, Book Three of Calvin’s Institutes: “The Benefits of Christ Made Available to Us by the Secret Operation of the Spirit”; there he said,

We must now see in what way we become possessed of the blessings which God has bestowed on his only begotten Son, not for private use, but to enrich the poor and needy. And the first thing to be attended to is, that so long as we are without Christ and separated from him, nothing which he suffered and died for the salvation of the human race is of the least benefit to us. To communicate to us the blessings which he received from the Father, he must become ours and dwell in us. Accordingly, he is called our Head, and the first-born among many brethren, while, on the other hand, we are said to be engrafted into him and clothed with him, all which he possesses being . . . nothing to us until we become one with him.³

Christ Our All-glorious End

As I began to better understand this marvelous mystery—the foundation of all spiritual blessings—my walk with Christ changed dramatically. Rather than seeing *Christ as a means to an end*, I realized *He was the all-sufficient and all-glorious end Himself*. Christ esteemed this profound reality so highly that it was the primary emphasis in His High Priestly prayer to His Father as He prepared to endure the agonies of the cross on our behalf. He prayed

that they may all be one; even as You, Father, are in Me and I in You, that they also may be in Us, so that the world may believe that You sent Me. The glory which You have given Me I have given to them, that they may be one, just as We are one; I in them and You in Me, that they may be perfected in unity, so that the world may know that You sent Me, and loved them, even as You have loved Me.

(John 17:21-23)

It is impossible to fathom the gulf that exists between our holy Creator and His sinful creatures. For the Son of God to purchase our redemption and be married to such a wretched bride is equally unfathomable. Nevertheless, such was the intended unity

decreed before the foundation of the world; and it was this very union between Christ and all whom the Father had given Him that occupied the heart of our Lord on the eve of His crucifixion. That this is recorded in Scripture is certain proof that He wants all who belong to Him to accurately apprehend the nature of this mystical union that we might esteem it as He did. It was His desire for His bridal church to relish the profound implications of this everlasting marriage, that she might enjoy the staggering benefits of what it means to be “in Christ.”

This is also at the heart of Paul’s doxology recorded in Ephesians 1:3: “Blessed *be* the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly *places* in Christ.” That little preposition “in” (“in Christ”) signifies the deep wonder of Christ being more than *with* us, more than existing *outside* us, but One who is *in* us, and we are *in* Him. One who is *more* than our sovereign King, our risen Savior, our Lord and Master, teacher or friend, although He is all this and more!

To be “in Christ” is not some mystical form of *pantheism* where Christ is absorbed into the “wholeness” which is God; nor is it a *physical* union (as taught by sacramentarians) where Christ enters men physically by participating in some rite or ceremony; nor is it a union of *essence* where we lose

our human identity and become one with God or absorbed into Christ. Rather, it is an expression of interconnectedness whereby we share a common spiritual life with Him, for “[we] have died and [our] life is hidden with Christ in God” (Col. 3:3), he is “our life” (Col. 3:4), and He lives in us (Gal. 2:20).

Scripture reveals some amazing truths about the nature of this union.

- It is a **SUPERNATURAL** union authored by God: “If anyone loves Me, he will keep My word; and My Father will love him, and We will come to him and make Our abode with him” (John 14:23).
- It is a **VITAL** union by which Christ becomes our very life: “I have been crucified with Christ; and it is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me; and the *life* which I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave Himself up for me” (Gal. 2:20; *cf.* Col. 3:3-4).
- It is an **ORGANIC** union in that with Christ believers form one body (the church) and respond to Christ as the head: “He is . . . the head of the body, the church” (Col. 1:18; *cf.* 1 Cor. 12:4-27; Eph. 4:15; 5:23).
- It is a **SPIRITUAL** union in that Christ dwells