

"In Christ" The Meaning and Implications of the Gospel of Jesus Christ

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When we meet some people we know immediately and instinctively that they are different. We are anxious to learn their secret. It is not the way they dress or talk or behave, although it influences these things. It is not that they have affixed a name tag to themselves and proclaimed themselves the adherent of a particular religion or ideology. It's not even that they have a strict moral code which they faithfully follow. It is that they know Jesus Christ, and that he is a living reality to them. They dwell in him and he dwells in them. He is the source of their life and it shows in everything they do.

*Not merely in the words you say,
Not only in your deeds confessed,
But in the most unconscious way*

*Is Christ expressed.
Is it a beatific smile?
A holy light upon your brow?
Oh no! I felt his presence
When you laughed just now.*

*To me, 'twas not the truth you taught,
To you so clear, to me still dim,
But when you came you brought
A sense of him.*

*And from your eyes he beckons me
And from your heart his love is shed,*

*Till I lose sight of you and see
The Christ instead.*

These people have an inner serenity which adversity cannot disturb; it is the peace of Christ. They have a spiritual power that physical weakness cannot destroy; it is the power of Christ. They have a hidden vitality that even the process of dying and death cannot quench; it is the life of Christ.

To use Biblical expressions, "The peace of Christ rules in their hearts," "the power of Christ is made perfect in their weakness," and "the life of Christ is made manifest in their mortal flesh."

The commonest description in the Scriptures of a follower of Jesus is that he or she is a person "in Christ." The expressions "in Christ," "in the Lord," and "in him" occur 164 times in the letters of Paul alone, and are indications to us of the profound understanding of the New

in the letters of Paul alone, and are indispensable to an understanding of the New Testament. To be "in Christ" does not mean to be inside Christ, as tools are in a box or our clothes in a closet, but to be organically united to Christ, as a limb is in the body or a branch is in the tree. It is this personal relationship with Christ that is the distinctive mark of his authentic followers.

The word "Christian" occurs only three times in the Bible. Because of its common misuse we could profitably dispense with it. Jesus Christ and the Apostle Paul never used the word, or at least not in their recorded teaching. What distinguishes the true followers of Jesus is neither their creed, nor their code of ethics, nor their ceremonies, nor their culture, but Christ. What is often mistakenly called "Christianity" is, in essence, neither a religion nor a system, but a person, Jesus of Nazareth.

Now let us explore some of the implications of being "in Christ." First, to be in Christ brings *personal fulfillment* as a human being. All around us are men and women who are unfulfilled and alienated, who are asking what it means to be a human being. They are seeking the secret of satisfaction, of happiness, and are searching for their own identity. Where is it to be found?

[Next page »](#)

[« continued from previous page](#)

Jesus said, "I am the Bread of Life. He who comes to me will never hunger, and he that believes in me will never thirst." There is a hunger in the human heart which none but Christ can satisfy. There is a thirst which none but he can quench. There is an inner emptiness which only he can fill. I don't know any more striking expression of this in contemporary literature than in the writing of Malcolm Muggeridge, who said, "I may, I suppose, regard myself as being a relatively successful man. People occasionally stare at me in the street. That's fame. I can fairly easily earn enough to qualify for admission to the highest slopes of inland revenue. That's success. Furnished with money and a little fame, even the elderly, if they care to, can partake of trendy diversions. That's pleasure. It might happen once in a while that something I said or wrote was sufficiently heeded to persuade myself that it represented a serious impact on our time. That's fulfillment. Yet I say to you, and I beg of you to believe me, multiply these tiny triumphs by a million, add them all together, and they are nothing, less than nothing, a positive impediment, measured against one draught of that living water that Christ offers to the spiritually thirsty."

Secondly, to be in Christ brings *brotherly unity*. The expression "in Christ" has a collective as well as an individual implication. It means to be related not only to the Messiah personally, the Christ, but also to the Messianic community he came to build. Indeed, it is not possible to belong to him without simultaneously belonging to it. In this new community Jesus has abolished the barriers of race, nationality, class and sex, which normally divide mankind. In its place he has created what the Apostle Paul calls a "single New Humanity." He writes again that "there is



neither Jew nor Greek, neither slave nor free,
neither male nor female, you are all one in
Christ Jesus."



Now this unity was a sensational fact in the early days of the Church. For in those days women were despised, slaves had no rights, and Jews and Gentiles were not on speaking terms. Today, however, to claim brotherly unity between the followers of Christ sounds like a rather sick joke, when so-called Christians are fighting one another in Northern Ireland and are segregated from one another in Southern Africa and elsewhere. Moreover, the Church of Jesus Christ is split into Catholic, Orthodox and Protestant, and Protestantism is further splintered into five main ecumenical families, not to mention the thousands of smaller denominations and house churches. Dr. David Barrett has documented 6,000 African Independent Churches. How can we possibly claim "brotherly unity?"

Only in this way: Although every follower of Jesus should blush with shame over the fightings and factions that have disgraced the history of the Church, yet those who are truly "in Christ" enjoy a unity with one another which transcends nation and denomination, race and rank, class and culture.

I quote Bishop Stephen Neil: "In the fellowship of those who are bound together by personal loyalty to Jesus Christ, the relationship of love reaches an intimacy and intensity unknown elsewhere. Friendship between the friends of Jesus of Nazareth is unlike any other friendship, and this ought to be the normal experience within the Church. Where it is experienced, especially across the barriers of race, nationality and language, it is one of the most convincing evidences of the continuing activity of Jesus among men."

Thirdly, to be "in Christ" brings *radical transformation*.

We are always in danger of trivializing what it means to be converted, or to be a follower of Jesus. To be "in Christ" is to be radically transformed, to the roots of our very being. As Paul says, "If anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation." And again, he speaks of our having died to the old life and risen again with Christ to a life that is new.

Notice that creation and resurrection language are the only vocabulary that can do justice to the experience of new life in Christ. And new life in Christ leads inevitably to a new lifestyle, with a new value system and new moral standards, as becomes plain to those who read the Sermon on the Mount. In that Sermon, Jesus sets before us a choice between two value systems—his own and the world's.

[Next page »](#)

[« continued from previous page](#)

The world admires the powerful, the successful, the tough and the brash, the achievers and the go-getters. But Jesus says, "Blessed are the poor in spirit," who are humble before God.

"Blessed are the meek," who are humble towards one another.

The world's model, like that of the 19th century German philosopher, Nietzsche, is the super-man, tough and overbearing. But the model of Jesus is still the little child.

The world is concerned with appearances, external conformity to conventions, rules and regulations. But Jesus again and again talks about the heart, "The pure in heart," or

"Where your treasure is, there your heart will be also."

The world says, "Sex is for fun, enjoyment without commitment." But Jesus says, "Sex is for love, enjoyment within commitment."

The world's philosophy is, "Give as good as you get. Love those who love you and repay evil for evil." But Jesus still says, "Love your enemies, pray for those who persecute you, do good to those who hate you, overcome evil with good."

The mind-set of the world is extremely materialistic, covetous for consumer goods. But Jesus says, "Don't be anxious about what to eat and drink and wear. Instead, seek first God's rule and God's righteousness."

We have no liberty to dismiss the teachings of Jesus as unpractical and unrealistic, or to convert it into a prudential little middle-class respectability. No, no, Jesus still says to us, "You've got to choose. Nobody can serve two masters." We have to choose between him and the world—between the broad road that leads to the destruction and the narrow way that leads to life.

But are the followers of Jesus interested only in themselves and one another, and let the rest of the world go hang? No. Jesus told us to be the salt and light of the world. That is, he means us to permeate secular society, seeking to arrest its social decay, as the salt hinders decay in fish and meat. He means us to be the light of the world, shining into the darkness of its tragedy and evil.

You know the name, perhaps, of Robert Bellah, who is a sociologist at the University of California at Berkeley, and also head of the Center of Japanese and Korean Studies there. In an interview with him some years ago, I read to my astonishment that he said this: "We should not underestimate the significance of the small group of people who have a new vision of a just and gentle world. In Japan a very small minority of Protestant Christians introduced ethics into politics and had an impact beyond all proportion to their numbers. They were central in the beginnings of the women's movement, labor unions, and virtually every reform movement." Then he added: "The quality of a culture may be changed when two percent of its people have a new vision." Now we are many more than two percent. We could have a far greater impact on society if we were truly the salt and the light of the world.

Sharing the good news of Jesus is not to be the hobby of a few eccentric enthusiasts. Mission is the concern of every follower of Jesus.

But there is a precaution that I need to add. To proclaim the uniqueness of Jesus is one thing; to proclaim the superiority of Western Civilization or ecclesiastical culture is something quite, quite different.

The 19th Century missionaries were great in their self-sacrifice and their courage, and we honor them for their devotion. Would that we had half their zeal for Christ! But with the benefit of hindsight, we have to say that they made a grave mistake in confusing the gospel with culture. The most striking example I have found is in West Africa, where I have seen with my own eyes Gothic spires rising above the coconut palms and Anglican bishops sweating copiously in Medieval European dress. And I've heard African tongues trying to speak Jacobean English. It's ludicrous.

Stanley Jones, who was himself an American Methodist missionary to India, put it strikingly. At the end of his book, *The Christ of the Indian Road*, he writes, "There is a beautiful Indian marriage custom, that dimly illustrates our task in India and where it ends. At the wedding ceremony in India, the women friends of the bride accompany her with music to the home of the bridegroom. They usher her into the presence of the bridegroom, but that is as far as they can go. They then retire and leave her with him.

"And that," he says, "is our joyous task in India. To know Him, to introduce Him, and then to retire. Not necessarily geographically, but to trust India with Christ, and trust Christ with India. We can only go so far. He and India must go the rest of the way."

Our concern as followers of Jesus is neither with a religion called "Christianity," nor with a culture called "Western Civilization," but with a person, Jesus of Nazareth, the one and only God-man who lived a perfect life of love, died on the cross for our sins, bearing in his own person the condemnation that we deserve, was raised in triumph from the grave and is now alive, accessible and available to us through the Holy Spirit. He is also coming again one day in sheer magnificence, that every knee should bow to him. That is the Person with whom we are concerned.

To be "in Christ" is to find personal fulfillment, to enjoy brotherly unity, and to experience a radical transformation. Only then can we become the world's salt and light, sharing the good news with others, making an impact on society, and above everything else seeking to bring honor and glory to his wonderful Name. ■■