

Devoted to God

Blueprints for Sanctification

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THE BANNER OF TRUTH TRUST

Prepositions of Grace

We must now take a deep breath and plunge into one of the most important, thrilling, and challenging areas of the New Testament's teaching: the Christian's union and communion with Jesus Christ. This is the heart of sanctification, the soul of devotion, and the strength of holiness. It will be a dominant theme here and in the chapters that follow.

We have seen that sanctification, like justification, is rooted in the grace of God and in its reception and outworking. Now we must ask and try to answer the question: What does God do in order to bring us to the Christlikeness which is his ultimate goal?

The New Testament answer is found especially but not exclusively in the correspondence of the apostle Paul: God's grace transforms us through our union and communion with Jesus Christ.

Paul's most succinct statement of this is found in Galatians, possibly his earliest extant letter.

The Epistle to the Galatians is by no means the easiest of Paul's letters. In it he is battling with a group of people who were insisting that Gentile believers needed to be circumcised if they were fully to belong to the people of God.¹ In the midst of his argument there is one verse that seems to stand out like a bright star in the night sky. In the past it was one of the first verses new Christians were

¹ Galatians 5:2-6.

encouraged to memorize. It served as an identity card, providing a brief summary description of the Christian life. What precedes Paul's monumental statement scarcely prepares us for it. To read it for the first time is like turning a corner in Zermatt in the Swiss Alps and catching one's first sight of the Matterhorn, arising as it were out of nowhere. Nothing can quite prepare us for Galatians 2:20:

I have been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me.

These words harmonize well with some of the notes we have already sounded. They emphasize that the resources for our Christian life are in Jesus Christ and not in ourselves. They serve to remind us—and we need to be reminded of this until we are almost exhausted hearing it—that our sanctification takes place in union with Christ and not apart from him. In addition, the teaching here links in with the sphere in which we have seen our sanctification is to be worked out—in our bodies: ‘The life that I now live in the flesh [*sarx*, physical body] I live by faith in the Son of God.’

The gospel never emphasizes the body at the expense of the spirit; but by the same token it never minimizes the importance of the body. Rather it changes the kind of life we live in the body. Thus Paul provides us with a brief summary of what he elsewhere calls ‘my gospel’.¹ He does so in a particularly memorable way. For here his use of *prepositional phrases* leads us into the heart of his whole theology. Four of them highlight the force of his exposition:

1. The Son of God ... loved me and gave himself *for* me.
2. The life I now live, I live by faith *in* the Son of God.
3. I have been crucified *with* Christ.
4. Christ lives *in* me.

¹ Romans 2:16; 16:25.

Preposition 1: The Son of God ... gave himself FOR me

The Lord Jesus Christ has given himself *for* me. This is the foundation of my union with him.

Paul has in view here the way in which Christ gave himself for us in his death on the cross.

The Son of God came into the world for us by taking and sharing our human nature. This, his union with us in our flesh, and not our faith union with him, is the foundation of our fellowship with him. His uniting himself to us in our human nature is the basis for our uniting ourselves to him in faith.

At the beginning of his life on earth, conceived by the power of the Spirit in the darkness of the womb of the Virgin Mary, the Son of God took human nature, in all its frailty and poverty, in order to live a perfect life for us, in our place. At the end of his life he was carried by friends into the darkness of the garden tomb, having died the death we deserve because of our sins. Because he has taken our human nature and lived in perfect obedience to his Father for us, and died for our sins and been raised into new life, and ascended to his Father in the nature he assumed, there are now resources in the hands of the Holy Spirit both to justify us and sanctify us, indeed even to glorify us.

Abraham Kuyper expressed real insight in this connection when he wrote that what a sinner needs is the transformation of his sinful human nature. But he continues:

The Holy Spirit finds this holy disposition in its required form, not in the Father, nor in Himself, but in Immanuel, who as the Son of God and the Son of Man possesses holiness in that peculiar form.¹

¹ Abraham Kuyper, *The Work of the Holy Spirit*, tr. H. De Vries (New York: Funk & Wagnalls, 1900), 461. Abraham Kuyper (1837–1920) was successively minister, newspaper editor, politician, founder of the Anti-Revolutionary Party in the Netherlands, founder of the Free University of Amsterdam and Prime Minister of The Netherlands (1901–05). He is best remembered today for the famous statement in his inaugural lecture, that ‘There is not a square inch in the whole domain of our human existence over which Christ, who is sovereign over all, does not say “Mine!”’

If there is to be both justification and transformation for sinful *human* nature, then the resources for both must come from one who has shared that nature, and in it lived obediently for us, and then, in further obedience to his Father, died in our place for our sins and broken the power of death in his resurrection. Only a Saviour who accomplishes this double obedience for us can resource a full and real salvation in which we are not only forgiven but also counted righteous, and then are transformed into his likeness by the Spirit.

The author of Hebrews provides us with the clearest statement of this principle when he writes:

For it was fitting that he, for whom and by whom all things exist, in bringing many sons to glory, should make the founder of their salvation perfect through suffering.¹

'Founder' here is the Greek word *archēgos* which means 'pioneer', 'founder', 'author', or 'trail-blazer'. It denotes a person whose actions lead others to share in the reality or consequences of his individual accomplishments. It is used only four times in the New Testament, always of Jesus.²

Jesus lived a life of complete obedience and perfect sanctification. He then died for our sins. As one man he brought to an end the reign of guilt, sin, Satan, and death. However he did this not as an isolated individual but as our substitute and representative. Thus what he has accomplished benefits us. He blazed the trail as our representative. Now all those who belong to him can share the fruit of his sanctification.

But the author of Hebrews adds a further important consideration. For this to be so, both the one who makes men holy (that is, Christ), and those who are made holy (that is, believers), 'must all have one origin' that is, they must all be members of the same

¹ Hebrews 2:10.

² Acts 3:15 ('Author'); 5:31 ('Leader'); Hebrews 2:10; 12:2 (both 'founder').

family.¹ The Sanctifier must share the same nature, and in that sense be one flesh, with those he sanctifies.

Jesus accomplished precisely this. By coming into the family of flesh and sanctifying his whole life, then by dying our death and being declared righteous or justified in his resurrection,² he became the 'pioneer' or 'author' of both justification and sanctification. Having been borne along by the Spirit and bearing him throughout his life and ministry, the ascended Saviour is able to say to him: 'Now all the resources of my incarnation, life, death, resurrection, ascension, and heavenly session are available for sinners, because they were all accomplished for them not for me. I am sending you to bring my people into union and communion with me so that they may be made like me.' This is what Jesus prophesied on the evening of his crucifixion:

When the Spirit of truth comes ... He will glorify me, for he will take what is mine and declare it to you.³

Thus, through the Spirit's uniting us to Christ we have been connected to the source of our salvation. His justification—God's declaration that he was righteous—is our justification; his sanctification—since he sanctified himself for our sakes⁴—is also ours. Thus, everything Christ did he did for me in obedience to his Father. All that he has done is therefore mine as a gift. He gave himself *for* me, in his love to me; and now through the Spirit all that he did is mine.

Preposition 2: I live by faith IN the Son of God

Paul now goes on to speak about the instrument or means by which we are united to Christ: through the Spirit we are brought into living union with him *by faith*: the life that I now live, I live by faith in the Son of God who loved me and gave himself for me.

¹ Hebrews 2:11; literally 'of one'.

² This is implied in 1 Timothy 3:16.

³ John 16:13-14.

⁴ John 17:19.

Faith means responding to Christ's invitation, 'Come to me ... and I will give you rest.'¹ With all the burden of my sin and guilt, in my weakness and failure, I rest on Jesus Christ and receive his gracious pardon and power.

The language of the Old Testament informs that of the New Testament here.

In the Old Testament 'to have faith' meant resting your weight, and the burden of your sin and need upon the Lord as your Saviour. On one occasion the language of 'roll on' to him is used.² In the same way in the New Testament 'to believe', 'to have faith', means to transfer trust from self to Christ, all the while recognizing that I cannot carry the heavy load of my sin and guilt, but he can. We trust him because his strong shoulders were stretched out on the cross as our sins were 'rolled onto' his body on the tree.³

New language?

New concepts often require a whole new vocabulary to describe them properly. The full revelation of the gospel is new wine. Old wineskins are inadequate to hold it. Thus we find that there are occasions when Paul seems to have created a new use of language, or moulded his grammar to fit the newly revealed final shape of the gospel. So while the Old Testament Scriptures prepared the way for Christ,⁴ they presented only a shadow picture. The full colour version required a new use of language to describe it. So the early Christians, perhaps led by Paul himself, occasionally employed language in novel ways in order to express what was new and unique about the gospel.

One particular expression Paul uses seems to be without parallel in ancient Greek literature. He speaks not only about believing *in*

¹ Matthew 11:28.

² Psalm 22:8 (*galal*).

³ 1 Peter 2:24.

⁴ Romans 1:2.

Christ (*en Christō*) but also about believing *into* Christ (*eis Christon*). Faith *in* the Son of God means believing *into* Jesus Christ.

First century people no more thought or wrote about 'believing *into*' someone else than we do. But Paul realized that this is in fact what faith effects. When we believe *on* or *in* Christ, we actually believe *into* him. Faith brings us into a person-to-person union and communion with Jesus Christ so that what is ours becomes his and what is his becomes ours. This perspective was so central to Paul's thinking that (in contrast with ourselves) we *never* find him describing believers as 'Christians'. In fact the expression is used very rarely in the New Testament.¹ Instead because we believe *into* Christ believers are most frequently described as those who are 'in Christ'.

I remember as a young teenager reading the famous passage in which Paul describes his 'thorn in the flesh'.² He introduces it by saying that he knows 'a man in Christ' who experienced a memorable revelation fourteen years previously. I naïvely wondered who this anonymous man might be whom Paul seemed to know so well! It slowly dawned on me that Paul was, of course, talking about himself. This for him was the essence of being a Christian—being united to Jesus Christ by faith, so that he typically described believers as those who were *in Christ*.

If by any chance you have never noticed this expression, or its parallels, now that you have been alerted to it you will notice it on every page of Paul's letters. On average it appears in his letters in one form or another between two and three times per chapter.

The point to grasp is this: believers are so united to Christ that all he is and has done for us becomes our possession too. When Christ died upon the cross, in some sense we died with him; when he rose from the grave, we also rose with him. Because we are united to him

¹ Remarkably only in Acts 11:26; 26:28; 1 Peter 4:16.

² 2 Corinthians 12:1-10.

everything he has done on our behalf is so embodied in him that when we believe ‘into’ Christ all that is his becomes ours.

Later we will see Paul unpacking this and working out its implications in considerable detail.

Larger than we first thought?

Most of us begin the Christian life knowing that we need to trust in Jesus so that our sins will be forgiven. That is true. But there is much more. In fact ‘every spiritual blessing’ becomes ours in Christ.¹ When we ‘get’ Christ by faith, we ‘get’ everything that is in him to pardon, liberate, and transform our lives. All the resources that God deployed in his Son—in his death, resurrection, ascension, and heavenly reign—we now inherit. If this is true then every resource stored up for us in Jesus Christ is now available to us through faith, to enable us to live for his glory.

In the second part of *The Pilgrim’s Progress* John Bunyan describes a scene in the House of the Interpreter. Christiana, the wife of the Pilgrim, who has now followed him on her own journey to the Celestial City, is shown a strange sight:

a man that could look no way but downwards, with a muck-rake in his hand. There stood also one over his head with a celestial crown in his hand, and proffered to give him that crown for his muck-rake; but the man did neither look up, nor regard, but raked to himself the straws, the small sticks, and dust of the floor.

It is a vivid picture of someone so enamoured of this world that he gives no attention to the treasures and pleasures of the gospel. So Christiana’s response is as telling as it is wise. She does not say ‘I am glad that’s not me!’ Rather, writes Bunyan:

Christiana. Then said Christiana, O! deliver me from this muck-rake.

¹ Ephesians 1:3. In one extended Greek sentence (our versions verses 3-14) Paul enumerates these blessings.

Interpreter. That prayer, said the Interpreter, has lain by till ’tis almost rusty: ‘Give me not riches’ is scarce the prayer of one of ten thousand. Straws and sticks and dust with most are the great things now looked after.

With that Mercy and Christiana wept, and said, ‘It is alas! too true.’¹

This is indeed a portrait of a non-Christian. But Christiana’s prayer is on the mark. She knows how easily we can slip back into finding our treasure on earth rather than in heaven—despite Jesus’ words.² Sadly we often live the Christian life setting our hearts on lesser treasures and pleasures than those that are our inheritance because we are in Christ ‘in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge’.³ It is hardly surprising therefore if our lives express so little of ‘the praise of his glorious grace’ and ‘the praise of his glory’.⁴ Only a new appreciation of what it means to believe in Christ—to believe into all he is for us—will introduce or recover the deep melody of grace.

But Paul presents us with another perspective on being ‘in Christ’:

Preposition 3: I have been crucified WITH Christ

The *heart* of union with Christ, Paul emphasizes, is this: when we trusted *into* him who was crucified for us there is a sense in which we also came to share in his crucifixion. Paul does not mean that we died physically but rather that united to Christ all the implications of his being crucified for us become our possession. Thus in Christ we ‘died’ out of the old family to which we belonged by nature—the family of Adam. What Paul elsewhere calls ‘the old man’—the

¹ John Bunyan, *The Pilgrim’s Progress* (Penguin Books: Harmondsworth, 1965), 247-8.

² Matthew 6:19-21.

³ Colossians 2:3.

⁴ Ephesians 1: 6, 12, 14.

⁵ Romans 6:6. The translation ‘old man’ is a more precise one here than ‘old self’ (ESV).

person I was in Adam—was crucified with Christ. As a result, all the claims the old fallen order had on me have come to an end.

But the crucified Christ to whom I am now united is also the risen Christ. I cannot be united to him in his crucifixion without being united to him in his resurrection as well.¹ When Christ rose, all the implications of his resurrection became my possession too, even if they are not yet all worked out completely.

Thus a Christian is inseparable from Christ in both his death and his resurrection. ‘I have been crucified with Christ’ ... yet, as Paul adds ‘I live! I died to the old life and now I have been raised into a new life altogether.

Yet more grammar

It is important to be clear about what Paul is *not* saying.

- He is not *currently crucifying* himself (present tense) with Christ, although it is true that he believes we must currently ‘put to death the deeds of the body’.²
- Nor is he saying, as he does later in Galatians, that ‘those who belong to Christ Jesus *have crucified* (past tense) the flesh with its passions and desires’.³ That took place in the initial act of faith in which we abandoned everything to Christ when we first came to trust him. In that sense it is a decisive past event.

In fact Paul is not describing something he has done, but what has been done for him and to him, what has happened to him through being united to Christ in his death. He has been *co-crucified with Christ*.⁴

Later in his ministry Paul expounded this principle in greater detail.⁵ For the moment we should notice that he is not speaking here

¹ Romans 6:4, 5, 8.

² Romans 8:13.

³ Galatians 5:24.

⁴ In Paul’s Greek ‘with’ is part of the verb ‘crucify’ and not a separate preposition.

⁵ See below, Chapter 4.

about something we believe because *we feel* it is true of ourselves, but because *God says* it is true of us. In fact we do not naturally feel or think of ourselves in this way. Paul is grinding spectacle lenses for us according to the gospel’s prescription. We need to wear these spectacles in order to see ourselves more clearly and to recognise and benefit from our new identity in Christ—for if we have been co-crucified with him we have died to the old order that formerly dominated our whole lives.

So we must learn to follow the gospel order and view ourselves through gospel lenses—since only when we know, understand, and believe this truth can we begin to live in the light of it. And only then does it make a difference in our lives.

This is profound theology, but how does it make any difference to us? We have already seen the answer: *our lives are transformed only when our minds are renewed*. Knowing that we have died to the old order and have been set free from the old age in which we were held captive⁶ provides us with a new sense of who we are in Christ that drives the new life we have been called to live.

Paul now takes our thinking one step further:

Preposition 4: I no longer live, but Christ lives IN me

In order to understand the undergirding logic of the gospel we have taken Paul’s prepositional phrases in their *theological* order rather than in the order in which they appear in the text.

- Christ gave himself *for us*.
- We live by faith *in him*.
- We are those who have been crucified *with him*.

Now Paul leads us into one further dimension of our new identity in Christ:

- It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me.

⁶ Galatians 1:4.

Christ now comes to dwell *in us* through the Holy Spirit. We can say ‘Christ lives in me.’ This is the New Testament doctrine of the indwelling of Christ.

The importance of this is demonstrated by the emphasis Jesus placed on it in the teaching he gave his disciples in the upper room. Consider his promises:

- When the Spirit came at Pentecost they would realize that ‘I am in my Father, and you in me, *and I in you*.’¹
- United to the vine, Christ himself, they were encouraged ‘Abide in me, *and I in you*.’²
- Thus ‘Whoever abides in me, and *I in him*, he it is that bears much fruit.’³
- When Jesus prayed for his disciples to be one, he spoke about the foundation of this union and communion: ‘*I in them* and you in me that they may become perfectly one.’⁴
- In fact his deepest longing (and his final petition for the church) was that ‘the love with which you [the Father] have loved me may be in them and *I in them*.’⁵

The same reality lies at the heart of Paul’s prayer for the Ephesians: ‘that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith.’⁶ This fills him with awe when he thinks about the implication, namely ‘Christ in you, *the hope of glory*.’⁷

We will see later that this indwelling of believers by Christ through his Spirit has very significant implications for Christian

¹ John 14:20.

² John 15:4.

³ John 15:5.

⁴ John 17:23.

⁵ John 17:26

⁶ Ephesians 3:20.

⁷ Colossians 1:27.

fellowship.¹ Jesus more than hinted at this in his final prayer that the union of believers in the church might be analogous to his union with the Father.² We need to try to grasp the enormity of what is being said.

Our forefathers used to speak about ‘living below the level of our privileges’. How true that is—and often because the sheer enormity of them has never really dawned on us. And perhaps, sadly, because we have either never known what they are, or never taken time to reflect on their significance for our lives. We have been too busy *doing* to take time to reflect on *being*. As a result we suffer from a loss of our Christian identity. We live as spiritual paupers when in fact we are indwelt by the Lord of glory. But grasp the indwelling of Christ and a new dynamic is released, and a new melody is introduced into our devotion.

It is a truism that we become like the people with whom we live. That is the case with married couples. In many respects, often quite mundane, they seem to become mirror images of each other—their thoughts, dispositions, words, even sometimes their facial expressions, reflect each another. Why? Because the intimacy of life and love together has brought them to think, act, and react, as one. Something similar is true of the closeness and depth of our union with the Lord Jesus Christ. As in marriage so when our husband is Jesus Christ we become one with him. When we come to faith we put on Christ.³ But in another sense Christ also puts us on—he dwells in our hearts through faith.⁴

Perhaps most Christians can remember years later—as I can—when and where and from whom they first heard about the indwelling of Christ in believers. I was a relatively young Christian, fifteen years old, listening to a sermon on Paul’s words ‘Christ in you

¹ See below, 127–128.

² John 17:21.

³ Romans 13:14; Colossians 3:12.

⁴ Ephesians 3:17.

the hope of glory'.¹ I left the service knowing that my perspective on life had been changed. Christ was dwelling in me! I looked to make sure that no one was watching and skipped all the way home. It was one of the most exhilarating moments of my young life. Now I knew who I was—someone in whom the Lord Jesus had come to dwell. Yes, it takes a lifetime for this truth, grasped in a moment, to penetrate to every element in one's life. But it will never do that until we have begun to grasp its reality.

All biblical truths are important and relevant. Some have the potential to change in a fundamental way how we live the Christian life. This is one of them.

As a recently arrived alien resident in the United States in the early 1980s I heard a speech by Wilson Goode during his successful campaign to become Mayor of Philadelphia. He spoke, as I recall, words to this effect: 'My grandfather was born into slavery.'

To a thirty-something Scotsman this statement from the lips of a man only a decade older than myself was emotionally staggering. I was stunned to think that someone of roughly my own generation could have known and talked to a close relative who had actually been a slave (even if he was probably still a child when the Thirteenth Amendment to the Constitution was passed in 1865²). Now I could understand why a person my own age would still 'feel' the painful emotions of those days and the lingering dark shadows of past oppression. Of course this would make an impact on how you would think about yourself. I remembered that I had read years earlier that when slaves in the South were emancipated some of them were incapable of taking it in; externally they were free, but

¹ Colossians 1:27.

² The Thirteenth Amendment decreed that 'Neither slavery, nor involuntary servitude, except as a punishment for crime whereof the party shall have been duly convicted, shall exist within the United States, or any place subject to their jurisdiction.'

internally the marks, the habits, the dispositions and mentality produced by years and generations of enslavement remained. They were free men, but they were never able to enjoy that freedom.

In some ways, sadly, the same can be true for Christians. We have been set free; we have received a new identity in Christ; we have been crucified with him who died for us; we have been raised into the new life we live by faith in him who dwells in us.

But is it too much for us to take in?

If it is, make it a priority to reflect on these gospel principles:

- The Son of God loved me and *gave himself for me*.
- I have been *crucified with Christ*.
- I live *by faith in the Son of God*.
- Christ *dwells in me*.

And then go and begin to live in the light of it.