

"Who I am in Christ"
 Sermon for 26 March 2017
 Texts: Ephesians 1&2

It all begins with who we are "in Christ." This phrase occurs some 36 times in Ephesians (and some 164 times in Paul's 13 epistles- Snodgrass, Ephesians, 39). That is a fairly clear indication of the importance of this insight into our new identity, as it were "in Christ." "In Christ" is our new identity, it is a compelling and transforming sense of identity. And what it bodes for us is a new trajectory in life, a new foundation, or purpose for living along with endless opportunity.

The first consequence of being "in Christ" is found in two things: first and foremost, it is an identity dependent on Jesus Christ; and secondly, it is an identity that is entirely new. I want to begin with the second: the entire newness of being "in Christ." It is a commonplace that people find their identity in many things. Some find it in their family situations (parent, child, both or neither). Some find it in their expertise, work or professional self. What they do defines who they are. I am not belittling either of these sources. Indeed one of the first questions of interest we have in meeting a new friend is: what do you do for work? When the answer is I am a mechanic, a teacher, an IT technician, we have learned something but not actually very much. It's a beginning. There is so much more to being a professional, or a parent than the mere title conveys. Still others find their identity in their ethnicity, race or genealogy; their cultural roots and biography. Again, these interests are important. Deep friendships will begin here and develop into associations, social groups, clubs and even guilds, unions and alumni setting. However, who we are "in Christ" is new, it is above and beyond all these; it transcends them. Indeed, who we are "in Christ" ushers us into a unity which is both broader and deeper—as we shall see. Being a Christian is an inclusive category because all kinds of people with very different identities find their home in the body of Christ. That is Paul's point in exclaiming that "in Christ" the **dividing wall of hostility has been taken down**. He, of course, was speaking directly to the barriers, racial, ethnic, ceremonial and theological between the Jews and Gentiles. He was addressing the impact of being in Christ on those distinctives which can and do serve to distinguish us from one another. In Christ, they distinguish us without dividing us. When we sing, "We are one in the Spirit, We are One in the Lord" . . . and follow up with "And they will know we are Christians by our love," we are celebrating the new. We are rejoicing in what Christ has brought to pass in us and among us by virtue of this new identity.

As to the first point, our dependence on Jesus Christ for our identity, we find the following. That our new identity reflects a new humanity, created by the Spirit even as it was made possible through the Son. Formerly:

- We were dead in sin *but now* are alive with our Messiah, Jesus (2:4).
- We were separated from Christ, *but now* we are "in Christ," **we have been brought near** (2:13).
- We were "foreigners," *but now* are "fellow citizens." (2:19).
- We have put off the "old self" but now have put on the new self" (4:20-24).
- Yes, we were "darkness," *but now* we are "light in the Lord" (5:8).

These five brief headings summarize for us the message of Ephesians and each transformation comes to us via the transforming power of the gospel of Jesus as presented by Paul. These insights make up the better part of the first half of the epistle and the second half is more focused on how we ought to live based on these insights.

To the point of this message, it is through the truth of these developments that we face an open future, a future of unlimited opportunity! I say unlimited because the God who has done all this is unlimited! Not only in his attributes, but also in the resources that He brings to bear on our personal transformation in Christ. And this is but the first stage in a very ambitious and vast undertaking: the restoration of all things! The perfections and sinlessness of our original situation in Eden? God is bringing it back. The absolute and unmarred beauty, splendor and majesty of Creation? God is bringing that back, too! Death, disease, suffering, wickedness, evil, darkness and sin? God is in the business of abolition. The abolition of slavery began with God and so it is no surprise that God has come against all forms of oppression, tyranny and bondage. That's the great news. The more daunting part is that God has redeemed you to accomplish that! We should not say that there is a method in His madness, but rather there is mercy in His method. *We get a piece of the action! We are privileged to do great, grand, mind-blowing feats of deliverance, rescue and liberation—we get to do more glorious things than picking up the litter after a Super Bowl, or cleaning up the refuse from the Dakota protesters!* There are oil spills, and nuclear disasters, floods and earthquakes, mud slides and tsunamis. . . there are diseases, disparities and injustices enough to keep us busy until the King returns. But the end is in sight! And none of us who undertake these things for the sake of the King will in anywise go without our reward! It is good to declare that our God is inexhaustible in the face of our challenges . . . and it is good to declare that we shall prevail because our God is a prevailing God! **Yes, Restoration Inc. is engaged and the CEO in charge is incomparable.** And we, who are in Christ, we are His workers, the peace-makers, the hope brokers; we are the deal-makers that God has raised up for such a time as this! And if international crises seem too overwhelming, too ambitious to us, it is helpful to be reminded that these challenges are met on a personal scale by individuals working on teams . . . and every crisis is local to some of us.

Opportunity unlimited. Does Jesus really expect to save the entire universe one soul at a time? Apparently so. That is the master plan. However, it is critical to bolster our confidence by reflecting, gratefully, on all that God has done already. Consider our position in Christ as presented in Ephesians 1-3. We have been chosen and adopted (1:4-6) and redeemed by the Son (1:7-12). We have been sealed by the Spirit (1:13-14) and invested with resurrection power (1:19). We have been healed of spiritual blindness (1:15-23) and brought from death to life by grace through faith (2:1-10). Even now we have been raised and seated with Him in heaven *in an active, ongoing demonstration of the immeasurable riches of grace, and superabundant kindness towards us!* (2:5-7). We have been re-created for the purpose of good works in the image and likeness of Christ—He indwells us and He infuses, informs and inspires us for **good works prepared beforehand for us to walk in!** See, who we are is in every sense prior to what there is to be done! Who we are “in Christ” is foundational to all that follows from that new identity.

5 Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus. . .

12 So then, my beloved, just as you have always obeyed, not as in my presence only, but now much more in my absence, work out your salvation with fear and trembling; 13 for it is God who is at work in you, both to will and to work for His good pleasure.

14 Do all things without grumbling or disputing; 15 so that you will prove yourselves to be blameless and innocent, children of God above reproach in the midst of a crooked and perverse generation, among whom you appear as lights in the world, 16 holding fast the word of life, so that in the day of Christ I will have reason to glory because I did not run in vain nor toil in vain.

Next week we shall move on to the endless renewal which is ours in Christ Jesus, realizing our unlimited opportunity in Christian growth.

Amen