

The "In Christ" Motif

By David L Wilson

Our wonderful Saviour, Jesus Christ was a participant in two different natures during His earthly sojourn. He took upon His sinless nature (His Divinity), our sinful nature (our humanity). When we understand this fact, we can begin to fully appreciate the "in Christ" motif of Scripture.

The concept of being "in" another is the concept of a family relationship. There is an earthly family. Adam stood at its head. There is an heavenly family, God the Father stands at its head. Corresponding to these families are two "natures". As human beings, we receive our "flesh" from Adam. As believers, we receive our "spirit" from God; we become partakers of the Divine nature through the indwelling Holy Spirit. In other words, when the Scriptures refer to an individual being "in" another, it is a reference to shared nature. Other terms that denote this corporate solidarity are "to know", or "to be one".

Most of the confusion that swirls around the "in Christ" motif results from the failure to recognize that the term is not limited to one nature or the other. In other words, just as there were two natures to be found in the person of Christ, so the Scriptures use the term "in Christ" sometimes to denote Christ's oneness with humanity through the incarnation and at other times to refer to the believer's spiritual oneness with the risen Lord. While one group of theologians in our beloved church, firmly grasp the tail of the elephant, recognizing the spiritual solidarity of believers "in Christ". Another group just as firmly attends to the trunk of the elephant, noting the Scriptural evidence for Christ's identification with the entire human race, through the incarnation. Unfortunately, both groups may have a tendency to deny the truths that the other is promoting. Some are in danger of denying that "in Christ" can refer to all men. Others have problems recognizing that the term "in Christ" sometimes, probably in most cases, is used to refer to the special privilege of spiritual reconciliation to Christ, which is the exclusive property of true believers. The argument goes on and on, but neither can prove that "in Christ" refers only to one and not the other. That is because the term "in Christ" is used in two different senses in Scripture, spiritually and fleshly. May God help us to comprehend the whole "elephant".

Contrary to the more common Adventist theology, Christ's identification with human beings extends to all mankind, not just to those who have believed. Christ does more than just identify with those who by faith become a part of the "spiritual" family of God. Through the incarnation, Christ identified with "all" humanity also. He did this by taking our fallen flesh. In this way, the whole world, was "in Christ". The most obvious passage that affirms this truth is 1 Corinthians 15:21,22. Because of the death accomplished "in Christ" for all humanity, every human being, saint or sinner, will be resurrected from the dead. This is unequivocal proof of a legal justification accomplished for all men by the cross of Christ. This was accomplished because Christ "tabernacled among us", incorporating the entire human race into Himself as a partaker of the "seed of David according to the flesh".

By taking our sinful flesh in the incarnation, Christ identified with the entire human race. It is thus that He could represent humanity to God and die as our Substitute. It is in this context that Jesus Christ is often compared with Adam, for He became the Representative of our fallen race. As our Representative Jesus died, and therefore since He died for us in that capacity, the entire human race that He represented is considered to have died there with Him. In that body, He bore the sins of the world. He tasted death for every man. Thus He saved the entire human race from eternal death. This glorious truth is the source of all the wonderful graces that come to man freely. They are bought by the blood of Christ. No one can even eat one common meal, without being nourished by this great truth. The sun shines on the evil and on the good, because Jesus saved both from annihilation, before either were good. So the "gift by grace", that is the free gift of a legal right to life, has indeed "abounded unto the many". Romans 5:15

The reason I have designated the truth of "all...in Christ" as the trunk of the proverbial elephant is because this fact of universal salvation must come first. The experience of justification by faith could never happen, without the prevenient, saving grace bought for humanity by the blood of Christ. It is this wonderful good news of the redemption that has already been accomplished in Christ's human body on the Cross, that inspires the heart with faith and love for the God who sent His Son to be the "Saviour of the World".

Being in Christ spiritually has meaning because of the objective work accomplished in Christ physically approximately 2000 years ago.

Nevertheless, however important the truth of Christ's representative work for the fallen race of men, we must not ignore the glorious truth of spiritual oneness with God in Christ which comes as the natural outflowing of simple faith in the message of accomplished salvation.

Christ was not only human, but He was Divine. Because of this Christ is identified with believers in a special sense, a sense in which He is not identified with unbelievers. He is "especially" the Saviour of those "who believe". 1 Tim. 4:10. "He that is joined unto the Lord is one spirit." 1 Cor. 6:16-17. Therefore it is believers that are particularly "in Christ" in this spiritual sense. In contrast, unbelievers are not identified with Christ's Divine Spirit. They are not born again. They are not a part of the Divine Family. They do not partake in the Divine nature with Christ.

When the sinner receives Jesus by faith, He becomes a recipient of the Holy Spirit. He is born again, by the Word of God. Through the precious gospel promises of that Word, the believer has become a partaker of the Divine Nature. That same Divine Nature that is the Father and the Son, dwells in us, by the Holy Spirit, which is freely given to us. Through the imputed righteousness of Christ, the sinner is made right with God. This is justification by faith. The true disciples of Jesus, become one with Him, even as He is one with God, the Father. As the result of the new birth, the true believer now contains the witness in Himself of sonship in the family of God. No, it is not some mystical revelation flowing from ecstatic feeling. Rather, it is the experiencing of a new life of love, complete surrender to Christ, and obedience to all of His commandments. Such is the spiritual aspect of the "in Christ" motif. It is not in contradiction of the universal, work of redemption accomplished for all men "in Christ". The two "in Christ's" dovetail together beautifully, when the Word of God is allowed to speak for itself.

When one accepts this apparently paradoxical view of the "in Christ" motif, the whole of Scripture opens before him with amazing clarity. Previously difficult passages are easily understood. The following chart is given in the hopes of clarifying these two different uses of the term "in Christ".

In Christ

Spirit
Divine Family
God, the Father
Christ Innately
We Partake
Through Inspiration
We, one with Christ
Oneness with God
One Spirit
Passed on through God's Seed, the Word
Shared Divine Nature
Believers in Him
Some out of Christ
The Believer's Representative
Bears Sins of Believers

In Christ

Flesh
Human Family
Adam, our first (human) father
We Innately
Christ Partook
Through Incarnation
Christ, one with us
Oneness with Adam
One Flesh
Passed on through Human Seed
Shared Human Nature
All Humanity in Him
None out of Christ
The World's Representative
Bore the Sins of the World

May God help us all to press together and accept the bigger picture of truth; one that takes in the entire "elephant" of the message of Righteousness by Faith, which God has sent to prepare His people for the return of Jesus Christ.