

PAUL'S THEOLOGY

Lesson 8

Jesus – Paul's Participatory Language

This week we are studying Paul's understanding of the Christian's participation in Christ as reflected mainly in passages that speak of Christ *in* the believer and the believer *in* Christ. Paul uses this language at certain important turns in his writings and scholars call it "Paul's participatory language."

Five minutes ago I was lying in bed thinking through the day. We are in Buenos Aires, Argentina visiting our oldest daughter Gracie for the Thanksgiving holidays. Gracie is studying abroad this semester. While this is my first time in Argentina, it is not for my wonderful wife Becky. Over twenty years ago, Becky spent a year in Buenos Aires as a goodwill ambassador for Rotary International.

During the year Becky was here, an Argentinean family took her under their wing and was family to her for a solid year. The elderly couple had four children a bit older than Becky, and already a few grandchildren. After Becky's year was over, the older couple (roughly the same age as Becky's parents) came to the United States on multiple occasions, always making a point to travel to wherever Becky was living for a visit.

Eight years ago the Argentinean mother, Susanna, died. Her husband, Eduardo, however, is still alive, and at 86, still quite spry. Becky emailed Eduardo that we were coming into town, and he had us over for lunch today, along with his four children, several of his grandchildren, and even a great granddaughter. It was a touching reunion.

Becky had brought Eduardo a gift, a coffee table book on Texas. The book was wrapped in paper that looked like an American flag. I was seated next to Eduardo when she gave him the book. Before opening it, Eduardo pointed out that the wrapping paper was the U.S.A. flag. We discussed the stripes as representing the thirteen colonies. We then discussed the stars in the flag as the 50 states. Eduardo pointed out that until 1958 there were only 48 states and 48 stars.

As I rehashed the day in bed, my mind went back to his fascination with the flag. Now one could take thirteen red and white stripes, add a corner of blue, and have a flag. But without the 50 stars, it would not be a flag of the United States. It would be pretty, it would wave in the wind, it would roll up and unfurl, but without the stars, it would not be our national flag. When you take that flag, however, and you

add the 50 stars where they belong, you have “Old Glory,” the flag of the United States of America.

As I lay in bed, it occurred to me that this was the time to write this week’s lesson. For this week, we discuss Paul’s language where he speaks of Christ in us, and us in Christ. This week we study the passages where Paul speaks of our participation in Christ, and his participation in us. This week we study what the scholars call Paul’s “participatory language.” The stars in the flag make the flag, just as Christ in us, makes us Christians. Hence, I am out of bed and typing!

Before we delve into this week’s written lesson, I need to again thank Scott Riling for teaching in my stead last Sunday. This Sunday Jared Richard, our Associate Pastor of College and Young Professionals, will teach in my stead. I appreciate his work, and, similar to last week, and preparing a brief handout to accompany his lecture.¹

PAUL’S PARTICIPATORY LANGUAGE

Paul was clear on the truth that while we live on earth as Christians, we are not alone. In a real sense, Christ lives within us and we live within him. This is true on a personal as well as a corporate (church) level. In setting out these ideas in the written lesson, we consider three important passages where Paul makes this truth known. The first two deal with the church’s participation with Christ. The other one focuses on the individual believer’s relationship with Christ.

1. Ephesians 5:25-32

Husbands, love your wives, as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her, that he might sanctify her, having cleansed her by the washing of water with the word, so that he might present the church to himself in splendor, without spot or wrinkle or any such thing, that she might be holy and without blemish. In the same way husbands should love their wives as their own bodies. He who loves his wife loves himself. For no one ever hated his own flesh, but nourishes and cherishes it, just as Christ does the church, because we are members of his body. "Therefore a man shall leave his father and mother and hold fast to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh." This mystery is profound, and I am saying that it refers to Christ and the church.

¹ Get ready next week as I plan on being back and teaching on “The Faith in Christ or Christ’s Faith?” This class will include some cutting-edge scholastic debate challenging traditional views on several key scriptures!

This passage is often the subject of studies on marriage and the relationship of husbands and wives. But we should never fail to see what it says about the church and its relationship with Christ. Paul sets out the love Christ had for his church as the model for husbands echoing language Paul used at the start of Ephesians 5, “walk in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us” (5:2).

As a prefatory matter, we should note an interesting reversal of typical biblical revelation here. Throughout the Bible, it is the human institution, the human relationship, indeed the human himself or herself that is used to explain some aspect of God. We saw this, for example, in our earlier lesson on anthropomorphisms. As Alister McGrath writes,

“Persons or social roles, largely drawn from the rural world of the ancient Near East, were seen to be suitable models for the divine activity or personality.”²

Here in Ephesians we see the opposite! Instead of Paul using the relationship of a husband and wife to explain or model God’s divine love for the church, we have Christ’ devoted love as the model from which husbands should learn to love their spouses.

Paul saw in the life and death of Christ a commitment of sacrifice that becomes the standard bearer, the definition, of true love. Paul uses the Old Testament passage on marriage found in Gen. 2:24 (“Therefore a man shall leave his father and mother and hold fast to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh”) as referring to Christ and the church. For Paul understood and taught that the relationship between Christ and the church was not simply one of a shepherd and his sheep, but it was more intimate and profound. Paul saw that from the beginning of humanity, God had planned for his people, his church, to be united with Christ in as close a bond as humans could experience.

The church and Christ combine as “one flesh.” What could Paul mean by this? A key is found earlier in Ephesians when Paul wrote, “But God ... even when we were dead in our trespasses, made us **alive together with Christ** ... and **raised us up with him** and **seated us with him** in the heavenly places **in Christ Jesus**” (Eph. 2:4-6). We as a church, as a united whole, exist in a mystical union with Christ our Lord. It is a pervasive union that sees us united with him now and in an eternal perspective.

Paul draws on this reasoning throughout Ephesians to emphasize the need for the church to be united. There are no reasons for separations to exist in a body. “For

² Alistair McGrath, *Christian Theology, An Introduction* (Blackwell 1994) at 206.

he himself is our peace, who has made us both one and has broken down in his flesh the dividing wall of hostility” (Eph. 2:14).

Paul’s teaching here was not a Pauline novelty. It was fully consistent with the teachings of Christ. In John 17 we read the prayer of Christ often called the “High Priestly Prayer” because of its intervention on behalf of the people of God. In this prayer, Jesus asked God that those who believe would “all be one, just as you, Father, are in me, and I in you, that they may also be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me ... I in them and you in me, that they may become perfectly one... I desire that they also, whom you have given me, may be with me where I am, to see my glory” (Jn 17:21-24).

Paul’s teaching is almost a mirror image of Christ’ prayer! Christ prayed for the church to be one, as Paul taught the church should be. Christ prayed for the church to be in him, and for Christ to be in the church, just as Paul taught also. Christ prayed for the church to see his glory, as Paul taught God would seat the church with Christ in the heavenly places.

Aside from mirroring Paul’s teaching, the prayer of Christ also sheds light on Paul’s meaning and purpose. As to purpose, the church is to be the one body of Christ as a testimony to the world. As to Paul’s meaning, it is not so simple.

In reading Paul the church fairly asks *how* the church is in union with Christ? Some teach that the union is found in the communion sacrament. These people point to the scriptures that teach the body and blood of Christ are the sacramental elements and that by consuming them, Christ is truly in the body of the believer.³ Others teach that the union between Christ and the church is manifested by the presence of the Holy Spirit.⁴ Still others point to an Aristotelean precept that there

³ We will consider this in more depth in the theology lesson on the Eucharist. We should note here, however, the passages that contribute to this are both in the gospels (Mt. 26:26-28 – “Now as they were eating, Jesus took bread, and after blessing it broke it and gave it to the disciples, and said, “Take, eat; this is my body.” And he took a cup, and when he had given thanks he gave it to them, saying, “Drink of it, all of you, for this is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins.”) And in Paul’s writing (1 Cor. 11:23-25 – “the Lord Jesus on the night when he was betrayed took bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it, and said, “This is my body which is for you. Do this in remembrance of me.” In the same way also he took the cup, after supper, saying, “This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me.”) Within Christianity traditions have proffered a number of explanations on these passages (“transubstantiation” – traditionally the Catholic view since at least the Lateran Council of 1215; “consubstantiation” – Luther’s view; “memorialism” – Zwingli and others). These views will be expounded in greater detail in later classes, but they are worthy of mentioning now because the echo many of the ideas set forth for how Christ dwells in the church and the believer.

⁴ Scriptures in support of this view include the promises of the coming Spirit by Jesus in John 14-16 as well as the passages from Paul.

is a difference between something's *substance* and its *accidents*. These are Aristotelean buzzwords. The *substance* of something is its real essence or essential nature. The *accidents* are simply the outward appearances. Using these ideas, some have taught that Christ is indwelling the church and the church is in Christ in its substance, even though in appearance and outward form Christ is not physically seen.⁵

The insight we gain from the prayer of Christ offers that the church is in Christ in the same sense that Christ is in the Father and the Father in Christ. Of course that, in some sense, actually produces more questions than it answers. For the unity and relationship of Jesus and the Father are tough to fathom in even a rudimentary form. Yet the passage does offer us some help in that we see that the bond is beyond simply consuming communal elements. Similarly, the bond is not a physical one. The bond does not remove the distinctions between those bonded. Yet the bond is real, intense, and very close.

We turn for additional insight to Colossians 1:24-27, a passage that is written as pertaining to the church, but does so by speaking to each individual within the church.

2. *Colossians 1:24-27*

*Now I rejoice in my sufferings for your sake, and in my flesh I am filling up what is lacking in Christ's afflictions **for the sake of his body, that is, the church**, of which I became a minister according to the stewardship from God that was given to me for you, to make the word of God fully known, the mystery hidden for ages and generations but now revealed to his saints. To them God chose to make known how great among the Gentiles are **the riches of the glory of this mystery, which is Christ in you, the hope of glory.***

We can see in this passage that Paul is writing to the church about Christ in the Church as the hope of glory, but Paul does so in a sense that Christ is also dwelling in each believer. Here we must focus on how Christ dwells within an individual Christian.

The same possible answers given for the church earlier are given to this question. As we try to answer the question, we should consider other passages from Paul that shed light.

⁵ This same reasoning was used for centuries as the explanation of the Catholic doctrine of transubstantiation: Christ is present in the essence of the bread, even though not in outward appearance.

Reading Paul we find multiple passages that seem to indicate that the Spirit does perform an indwelling function that is at least part of the answer, if not the whole answer to how Christ is in the believer. Paul wrote to the Romans that,

“You, however, are not in the flesh but in the Spirit, if in fact **the Spirit of God dwells in you**. Anyone who does not have the Spirit of Christ does not belong to him. But **if Christ is in you**, although the body is dead because of sin, the Spirit is life because of righteousness. If **the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you**, he who raised Christ Jesus from the dead will also give life to your mortal bodies through **his Spirit who dwells in you**” (Rom. 8:9-11).

In this passage Paul relates that the Holy Spirit *is* the Spirit of Christ. That same Spirit does indwell the Christian just as Christ promised (Jn 14:17 “I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Helper ... **the Spirit of truth**... You know him, for he dwells with you and **will be in you**”) and Peter proclaimed (Acts 2:38 “And Peter said to them, “Repent and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins, and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit”).

We have a similar affirmation that Paul taught the indwelling Spirit was the indwelling Christ in Ephesians:

“For this reason I bow my knees before the Father ... that ... he may grant you to be strengthened with **power through his Spirit in your inner being**, so that **Christ may dwell in your hearts** through faith” (Eph. 3:14-17).

We should be very careful here to specify that Paul is not saying that the Holy Spirit and Christ are one and the same. That would violate the orthodoxy the church understands from scripture regarding the Trinity. Yet there is a clear understanding from Paul that as Jesus and the Father are one, Jesus and the Spirit are as well. There is a unity even as there is distinction.

So we find that at least part of the answer of how Christ dwells in the church and in the believer is through the indwelling Holy Spirit, the Spirit of Christ. That Spirit brings about the hope of glory, the confidence that Gentile and Jew both equally share in the eternity of Jesus. We further our understanding at this point if we note our third major passage for study today.

3. 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.*

Paul speaks in Galatians in a way that shows us he means something beyond a flat literalism of the words he chooses. Whether Paul is speaking metaphorically, philosophically, or symbolically, at least we know that Paul did not mean he had literally been crucified with Christ. Paul was not on the cross of Christ, nor was he one of the robbers on either side.⁶

Yet we must not diminish the force of Paul's statement. For even though Paul is not speaking literally, he is speaking truthfully! Paul was crucified with Christ in that Paul's sin, Paul's earthly existence as a fallen descendent of Adam was part of the load that Christ bore on the cross. Paul wrote in Romans 6:5 of being "united with him [Christ] in a death like his." Paul explained in Romans 6:3-4,

"Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? We were buried therefore with him by baptism into death, in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life."

Now Paul having been crucified with Christ was still alive, but his life was different! Christ was living in Paul. Just as Paul had shared in the death of Jesus, he shared in the resurrection. Yet for Paul the resurrection was still in his "old" body. Paul was still living in the flesh. But because Christ had been crucified, and Paul with Christ, Paul's new life in his old flesh had new meaning, new purpose, and a new direction. Paul now lived by faith in the Son of God, his redeemer.

It is in this sense that Paul wrote to the Corinthians,

"Because of him [God] you are **in Christ Jesus**, who became to us wisdom from God, righteousness and sanctification and redemption" (1 Cor. 1:30).

The presence of Christ, of his Spirit, marks the Christian. An American flag is not an American flag without the stars, and a Christian is not a Christian without Christ!

⁶ Interestingly, the word Paul uses for "crucified with Christ" is the same word used in the gospels in reference to the thieves hanging on each side of the Messiah.

POINTS FOR HOME

1. “*We are members of his body*” (Eph. 5:30).

Let us work for the unity of the church. We may not be in a position to see that the thousands of denominations reunite, but we can choose to honor the church of Christ by standing on his word, uniting around his body, praying for and seeking the common ground that God would have us stand upon. This is not a plea to dilute or ignore doctrinal purity. But it is a call to study, to pray, and to show the world a united church, a united body of Christ in whatever ways we can.

2. “*Christ in you, the hope of glory*” (Col. 1:27).

Look long and hard at the fellowship of the church, then look long and hard in a mirror. In the reflections you should see something worthy of hope, and something worth working for. There should arise within us a drive and desire to see the riches of God’s glory manifested. Those riches are not the worthlessness of monetary possessions. They are the confident expectation of an eternal life that is ours. This is an eternal life confirmed by the presence of Christ within us. We should work toward seeing that bear fruit. We should press on toward that calling. We should reach and strive for the holiness that is part and parcel of our inheritance.

3. “*The life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God*” (Gal. 2:20).

If we live with Christ, He in us and we in him, we are intimately connected. Our choices in life are his choices. Our desires are his desires. Our words are his words, and our deeds are his deeds. If we live outside of this faith, we live the life of our old crucified self rather than that of our redeemed eternity. Now what sense does that make? Honestly, why on earth would we do such? Let us commit anew to walking by faith in the Son of God who dwells within us!