

The New Creation in Christ

Chosen "in Him"

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The central purpose of God's plan of salvation was to create for himself "a people" - children of his very own - who would share in the blessings of God's goodness and bring forth the fruits of their relationship with him "to the praise of his glory." This plan of God was "purposed" in Christ (Eph. 1:9) before the creation of the world and "accomplished" in time through Christ's redemptive work for God's people (Eph. 3:11). The central focus of this plan is clearly set forth in Paul's Letter to the Ephesians:

Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in the heavenly realms with every spiritual blessing in Christ. For he chose us in him before the creation of the world to be holy and blameless in his sight. In love he predestined us to be adopted as his sons through Jesus Christ, in accordance with his pleasure and will - to the praise of his glorious grace, which he has freely given us in the One he loves (Eph. 1:3-6).

Though God's choice to have a people in Christ was conceived in his love "before the creation of the world," it was worked out "in history" through God's choice of Abraham and his seed - Israel - to be the vehicle of bringing the blessings of his salvation to "all nations" of the world. This is explicitly recorded in the Book of Genesis:

Then the Lord said, "Shall I hide from Abraham what I am about to do? Abraham will surely become a great and powerful nation, and all nations will be blessed through him. For I have chosen him, so that he will direct his children and his household after him to keep the way of the Lord by doing what is right and just so that the Lord will bring about for Abraham what he has promised him (Gen. 18:17-19; cf. 12:1-3; 15:1ff).

This promise to Abraham culminates in the coming of Jesus the Messiah from the people of Israel (Rom. 9:4-5). He is the true "seed of Abraham" (Gal. 3:16) and the "elect" or "chosen one" of God (Isa. 42:1-4; Luke 3:22, 9:35). He is, in fact, the representative leader of God's people (Dan. 7:13ff.); indeed, he is in a sense the ideal "Israel" (Matt. 2:15; Hos. 11:1; Isaiah 49:3) - embodying in himself God's purposes and destiny for his people.

Andrew Lincoln, in his commentary on Ephesians, explains about God's election of a people and the fulfillment of his purposes "in Christ":

God's purpose in choosing out a people for himself is of course a familiar idea in the OT (e.g., Deut. 7:6-8; 14:2), which witnesses to Israel's consciousness of God's choice of her in the midst of the twists and turns in her historical fortunes. God had chosen Abraham so that in him the nations of the earth would be blessed, and Israel's election was not for her own self-indulgence but for the blessing of the nations: it was a privilege but also a summons to service. Christian believers also had this consciousness of being chosen to be the people of God. The new element was the [in Christ] phrase. Their sense of God's gracious choice of them was inextricably interwoven with their sense of belonging to Christ. God's design for them to be his people had been effected in and through Christ. They saw him as God's Chosen One. Indeed, Paul in Gal. 3 treats Christ as in a sense fulfilling Israel's election. Christ is the offspring of Abraham par excellence (3:16) so that they too, because they are Christ's, are Abraham's offspring (3:29). The notion of being chosen in Christ here in Ephesians is likely to include the idea of incorporation into Christ as the representative on whom God's gracious decision was focused [WBC, Ephesians, p. 23].

Thus, it is "in Christ" that all of God's purposes for his people - as well as for his creation - are brought to fulfillment (Gal. 3:16-29; Eph. 1:3-14).

The phrase "in Christ" therefore sets forth a key concept that ties together the Old Testament and the New and that provides the basis for the life of all Christian believers¹. In fact, the "in Christ" concept is the key to both the continuity - as well as the discontinuity - which the NT people of God have in relationship to the OT people of God, Israel. As for continuity, NT scholar F.F. Bruce states,

Jesus provides *in himself* the vital continuity between the old Israel and the new, and his faithful followers were both the righteous remnant of the old and the nucleus of the new (The Origin of the Bible, p.12, Tyndale Pub., emphasis mine).

It is "in Christ" that new covenant believers "participate" in the "body" and "blood of Christ" - a truth that is so vividly symbolized in the Lord's supper (1 Cor. 10:15-17). Jesus called out and chose his twelve apostles from the nation of Israel to be the leaders of his church, beginning

¹ The phrase "In Christ" means "in Messiah", God's anointed Savior and King.

as the faithful remnant of Israel (Matt. 16:18). It was specifically "for them" (i.e., "for you" Luke 22:19-20) - the representatives of the new covenant people of God - that Jesus' body was "broken" and Jesus' blood was "poured out". And so, through the apostles, Christ established with his church "the new covenant in my blood" (Luke 22:14-20; cf. I Cor. 11). Thus, the continuity between the Old and the New Covenant people is established "in Christ."

But it is also "in Christ" that the discontinuity between the Old and the New takes place, for the new covenant people of God no longer consist of just "Israel according to the flesh" (I Cor. 10:18). Instead, "in Christ" the reconciliation of all mankind - both Jew and Gentile - has taken place. Therefore, all barriers between Jew and Gentile - as well as between man and God - have been broken down. The result is "one new man in Christ." As Ephesians states,

But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far away (i.e., Gentiles) have been brought near through the blood of Christ. For he himself in our peace, who has made the two one and has destroyed the barrier, the dividing wall of hostility, by abolishing in his flesh the law with its commandments and regulations. His purpose was to create in himself one new man out of the two (Jews and Gentiles), thus making peace (Eph. 2:13-15).

Thus, via Christian believers' incorporation "in Christ" direct continuity is maintained with the Old Testament people of God - making the Old Testament the spiritual history of the Christian church. And yet, there is also discontinuity in the fact that the one people of God no longer consists of only "Israel according to the flesh" (I Cor. 10:18) but has expanded to include all people - both Jew and Gentile - who by faith and the Spirit are incorporated "in Christ."

It is important to understand that both "election", "predestination" and the "in Christ" concept are all corporate concepts in the Bible. It is only by being incorporated into Christ - through faith and the Spirit - that individual believers become part of the "elect" or "chosen people" of God (e.g. Col. 3:12; I Pet. 1:2; 2:9). Just as Israel as a nation was called to be the OT chosen people of God, so in the new covenant era the people of God are the "elect" or "chosen people" of God only as a corporate entity "in Christ" (Eph. 1:4). As C.K. Barrett explains:

It is important to recall here that the seed of Abraham contracted till it became ultimately Christ (Gal. 3:16) and was subsequently expanded to include those who were in Christ. This means that

election does not take place arbitrarily or fortuitously; it takes place always and only in Christ. They are elect who are in him; they who are elect are in him. It is failure to remember this that causes confusion over Paul's doctrine of election and predestination (cf. Gal. 3:29 emphasis mine). [Black's NT Commentaries, Romans, p. 171.].

F.F. Bruce, then, summarizes for us the NT doctrine of election in his commentary on Ephesians:

It was in Christ, then, that God chose his people "before the world's foundation." This phrase ... denotes the divine act of election as taking place in eternity. Time belongs to the created order: believers' present experience of the blessings bestowed by God is the fulfillment on the temporal plane of his purpose of grace toward them conceived in eternity. As the fulfillment is experienced "in Christ," so is in him that the purpose is conceived. If, as Col. 1:16 affirms, it was "in him" that all things were created, so we are assured, earlier still it was "in him" that the people of God were chosen. **He is the Chosen of God par excellence; it is by union with him, according to the divine purpose realized in time, that others are chosen** [NICNT, Ephesians, Colossians, Philemon, p. 254, Eerdmans).

"New Creation!"

It is important to realize that the phrase "in Christ" encapsulates an eschatological perspective - i.e., a perspective which recognizes the fulfillment of God's promises, bringing "the end" to this present age, and ushering in the age to come. This perspective was the driving force of the new covenant believers of the first century church. The resurrection of Christ and the giving of the Spirit were clear signs to the first century church that the end of the present age had already begun and that the firstfruits of the age to come was already theirs. They were thus a people living "between the times" of the old and the new creation. But, as C.K. Barrett explains, it was only "in Christ" that believers now participated in this reality.

"In Christ" is itself a Pauline phrase of central ... significance. It is best explained as originating ... in primitive Christian eschatology. The death and resurrection of Jesus were eschatological events, effecting the transition from this age to the age to come. Believers could take advantage of this transition, but the transference from the one age to the other could take place only "in Christ" (ibid., p. 119).

A key verse in understanding this perspective is, of course, II Cor. 5:17. I quote this verse in several different versions for comparison sake:

Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; old things have passed away; behold, all things have become new (NKJV; italicized words are not in the underlying Greek text).

Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come (NIV).

So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new! (NRSV).

For anyone united to Christ, there is a new creation: the old order has gone; a new order has already begun (REB).

All of these translations have their good points but the New Geneva Study Bible summarizes the thought behind the verse in one of its notes and points out a key matter regarding the translation of this verse:

In Christ: Union with Christ summarizes our experience of redemption. Believers are elected (Eph. 1:4, 11), justified (Rom. 8:1), sanctified (I Cor. 1:2), and glorified (3:18) "in Christ." Here Paul focuses on the momentous significance of the believer's union with the Savior. Because Christ is the "last Adam," the One in whom humanity is recreated (I Cor. 15:45; Gal. 6:16; Eph. 2:10) and who inaugurates the new age of messianic blessing (Gal. 1:4; cf. Matt. 11:2-6), the believer's spiritual union with Christ is nothing less than participation in the "new creation." Translating "there is a new creation" instead of "he is a new creation" draws this conclusion more clearly, but the thought is there either way [p. 1835].

This is certainly an important point. "In Christ" believers have already become not just a new creation but a part of God's entire "new creation" of the coming age. The whole outlook of Christian believers should be conditioned by this reality. Believers' lives are no longer to be "conformed to this age" but to be "transformed by the renewing of your minds" (Rom. 12:2).

Richard B. Hays in his book *The Moral Vision of the New Testament* summarizes this NT perspective for believers today:

According to Paul, the death and resurrection of Jesus was an apocalyptic [or, eschatological] event that signaled the end of the old age and portended the beginning of the new. Paul's moral vision is intelligible only when his apocalyptic perspective is kept clearly in mind: the church is to find its identity and vocation by

recognizing its role within the cosmic drama of God's reconciliation of the world to himself.

The image of "new creation" belongs to the thought-world of Jewish apocalypticism. One of the fundamental beliefs of apocalyptic thought was its doctrine of the "two ages": the present age of evil and suffering was to be superseded by a glorious messianic age in which God would prevail over injustice and establish righteousness in a restored Israel." Paul's use of the phrase "new creation" echoes Isaiah's prophecy of hope:

For I am about to create a new heavens and a new earth; the former things shall not be remembered or come into mind. But be glad and rejoice forever in what I am creating; for I am about to create Jerusalem as a joy, and its people as a delight. I will rejoice in Jerusalem, and delight in my people; no more shall the sound of weeping be heard in it, or the cry of distress (Isa. 65:17-19 NRSV; cp. II Pet. 3:13; Rev. 21-22).

When we hear 2 Cor. 5 in the context of Isaiah's fervent prophetic hope for the renewal of the world, we understand that Paul is proclaiming that the church has already entered the sphere of the eschatological age.

The apocalyptic scope of 2 Corinthians 5 was obscured by older translations that rendered the phrase in verse 17 as "he is a new creation" (RSV) or - worse yet - "he is a new creature" (KJV). Such translations seriously distort Paul's meaning by making it appear that he is describing only the personal transformation of the individual through conversion experience. The sentence in Greek, however, lacks both subject and verb; a very literal translation might treat the words "new creation" as an exclamatory interjection: "If anyone is in Christ - new creation!" ... Paul is not talking about an individual's subjective experience of renewal through conversion; rather, for Paul, *ktisis* ("creation") refers to the whole created order (cf. Rom. 8:18-25). He is proclaiming the apocalyptic message that through the cross God has nullified the kosmos of sin and death and brought a new kosmos into being. That is why Paul can describe himself and his readers as those "on whom the ends of the ages have met" (I Cor. 10:11). The old age is passing away (cf. I Cor. 7:31b), the new age has appeared in Christ, and the church stands at the juncture between them. [The Moral Vision of the New Testament, pp. 19-20, Harper-Collins]

Whichever translation is chosen it is this perspective that should dominate the thinking of all who are "in Christ." In him "the old has gone, the new has come." It is for the purpose of participating in this "new creation" that God

has called us and chosen us to be his children - so as to be a people who are transformed by the power and vision of all that we have in Christ. Once again, as so often, Paul's letter to the Ephesians summarizes these great truths in God's plan of salvation:

But because of his great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions - it is by grace you have been saved. And God raised us up with Christ and seated us with him in the heavenly realms in Christ Jesus, in order that in the coming ages he might show the incomparable

riches of his grace, expressed in his kindness to us in Christ Jesus. For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith - and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God - not by works, so that no one can boast. For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do (Eph. 2:8-10 NIV).

This is truly "amazing grace!" May we be found worthy of such a high and holy calling.

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