



THE PERSON OF CHRIST

LESSON 3

ACTS AND THE LETTERS OF PAUL

1. Acts of the Apostles

The departure of Jesus, and the Pentecost experience, introduce the story of Acts. Whilst of all the New Testament Acts is an historical book, this account of the spread of the early church is built around the sermons of the apostles and other preachers. Those sermons all had a common fundamental outline. This outline was centred on the historic Jesus. A reporter's summary of an early Christian sermon would have read something like this:

"The prophecies of the Old Testament are fulfilled and the new age has dawned (Acts 2:16; 3:18, 24).

The Messiah (Christ) born of the seed of David has appeared. He is Jesus of Nazareth, God's servant who went about doing good and healing by God's power, was crucified according to God's pre-determined purpose, was raised from the dead the third day and is now exalted to God's right hand (Acts 2:33, 36; 3:13; 4:11; 5:31). He will come again in glory for judgement (Acts 3:20; 10:42). Therefore, let all repent, believe, be baptised for the forgiveness of sins and receive the gift of the Holy Spirit (Acts 2:38, 41; 3:19; 4:12; 5:31, 32; 10:43)."

The foundation of the early preaching was centred on the historical Jesus. He, the promised, crucified, risen Christ has made salvation available and forgiveness possible.

The resurrection of Jesus became the supreme sign bestowed by God that his purpose of the ages had been accomplished in Christ. After the events of Easter and Pentecost, it was inevitable that faith should now be centred wholly on Jesus, whom God had clearly and decisively made Lord and Christ as his resurrection showed (Acts 2:36). Faith is hence-forward "the faith which is through Him" (Acts 3:16).

2. THE WRITINGS OF PAUL

The apostle Paul does not discuss the historical Jesus as such, but he makes the centre of his presentation of Christ revolve around two focal points. The first was his vivid conversion experience when he met the glorified Christ on the Damascus road. Time and time again he referred to this life-changing encounter as he preached (Acts 9:1-22; 22:6, 16; 26:12, 18). This was the most vital and formative of all the experiences which had influenced the apostle's life and his theology. The second is his unique phrase "in Christ". The heart of Paul's religion is UNION WITH CHRIST, and he saw the Lord as the one who actually lived within him. His portrait of Jesus may be summed up in the words, "I live, yet not I, but Christ liveth in me" (Gal. 2:20).

IN CHRIST is the mainspring of the apostle's faith and life, and even though he reaches great heights in the doctrines of justification, sanctification and reconciliation, **IN CHRIST** is his main theme. "Union with Christ" is a brief, yet all embracing concept of all that the apostle means by salvation.



IN CHRIST (and its equivalents "in Him" and "in the Lord") occurs some 164 times in the epistles and is a phrase characteristic of Paul. Ephesians 1:1-15 emphasises this point. The importance of this insight by Paul cannot be stressed enough. It is worth reminding ourselves that no such words have ever been used, or indeed could ever be used of man. We do not speak of being "in" Martin Luther or John Wesley. The fact is that when we speak of being "in Christ" we are consciously or unconsciously making a confession of faith: we are framing a doctrine of Christ; if we are saying something about ourselves, we are saying something far more tremendous about Jesus. We are declaring that Jesus is no mere fact of history, no towering personality of the past, but a living, present Lord, whose nature is the very nature of God. So far-reaching is this favourite apostolic phrase.

IN CHRIST has been expressed as follows, "Just as a bird lives in the air and needs air to live in, just as a fish lives in the water and can live nowhere else so, in Paul's view, a Christian requires the presence of his Lord: and if that is withdrawn, he must speedily die". In Paul's own succinct confession "Christ means life to me" (Phil. 1:21).

This realisation had come to Paul in his conversion experience on the Damascus Road. Jesus is alive! God had raised Him from the dead. His followers had been right after all. It was a staggering discovery. This risen, glorified Jesus now reigned in his life. He wasn't an outsider looking on, but the One who now lived and reigned in his life. Christ was in him. This didn't mean that Paul had become a puppet or a robot: he was still a "person" in the fullest sense, but now Christ, instead of self, was the dynamic of his life. This is the fundamental experience of the Christian. Who reigns in my life? Christ or self? It is as simple and as decisive as all that.

Not only does this concept of "in Christ" sharply divide Christianity from any other religion, but it has profound implications for the life of a Christian. Let us turn to two examples, both found in Philippians:

- a) Philippians 2:5 - "Let this mind be in you, which was also in Christ Jesus". On the face of it, that simply means "let Jesus' attitude be yours". But if we interpret "**IN CHRIST**" in the fullest Pauline sense, the meaning that emerges is this: "see that you apply among yourselves, in your community life, the spirit which has been born within you by Union with Christ". Clearly, what Paul is hinting at is the danger - as common today as it was then - of a separation between personal religion and public relationships. He reminds the Philippians that their experience "in Christ" must be the controlling and directing factor in all their treatment of one another.
- b) The second example, which is similar, is found in Philippians 4:2, where he begs Euodias and Syntyche to "be of the same mind in the Lord" which means more than common agreement. He is saying "remember your common union with Christ": it is not in two different spheres that your spirits are living; the two spheres coincide, there is but one and that is Christ. Realise this and act on it and your present differences will vanish". **IN THE LORD** you will agree.

These passages illustrate the important fact that very often Paul's real meaning will yield itself up only when we refuse in any way to thin down or reduce his great watchword **IN CHRIST**. For always, to Paul, it was this conception that struck the keynote of religion and echoed the deepest experience of his soul.



This personal relationship stands out from every page of his letters, and his constant concern is that his converts know the deeply satisfying experience of being IN CHRIST. When this has seized a man, life is literally transformed.

Paul, of course, did not preach, teach and write in a vacuum. From his conversion experience, he gladly accepted the common formula, the preaching basis of the Church. This is, as we have seen, the unifying component of the New Testament. The apostle takes this common foundation and builds upon it. We may liken this to the building of a house. The foundation is laid (1 Cor. 15:1-4) and Paul erects upon this the walls and roof.

Question 1:

What O.T. prophecies in Acts 3:18-26 had been fulfilled in Jesus?

Question 2:

What was Paul's conversion experience and encounter with Christ? Give a brief outline.

Question 3:

From these notes and scripture, give a brief summary of the meaning of Paul's use of "in Christ".

Question 4:

In your own words, explain what you think "in Christ Jesus" means in Philippians 2:5.

Question 5:

What is the "foundation" which Paul has laid (i.e. the basic gospel) 1 Corinthians 15:14?

QUESTION FOR GROUP STUDY:

What does Paul mean when he uses "in the Lord" in Philippians 4:1-4? How can this be applied to churches today? How can this be applied to you and your particular church?