

## **CHRIST IN US; CHRIST AS US; CHRIST THROUGH US**

The history of Christian theology reveals that there has been far more written about the believer's being "in Christ" than has been written about Christ being present and active *in, as, and through* the Christian. This is to be expected, in part, because there are far more references in the New Testament to our being "in Christ" than there are to Christ being "in us." But the paucity of emphasis and literature on Christ's internal action in the Christian individual can also be attributed to prevailing emphases within the two major subdivisions of the Western Church.

Roman Catholic theology has traditionally taught the infused grace of God in the continuing work of Christ, whereby the empowering energy of God is granted to the Christian in order to live righteously. The primary emphasis of Roman theology has not been on the subjective spiritual reality of Christ in individual Christians, however, but on the collective and corporate realities of Christ's work in the ecclesiastical community of the Roman Church. Those in the Church of Rome are regarded to be "in Christ," and there is no salvation apart from the Holy Roman Church. To apply Roman Catholic emphases to the phrases of this study: Christ is *in us collectively*, for He is in His Body, the Church catholic. Christ is expressed *as us collectively*, for He expresses Himself as the Holy Roman Church. Christ is expressed *through us collectively* whenever the Catholic Church acts. This collective and corporate emphasis of the Roman church has diminished emphasis on the personal and subjective action of Christ in the Christian individual.

In Protestant theology the dearth of emphasis on the subjective presence and activity of Christ in the Christian individual has often not only been the result of an over-collectivized emphasis on Christ's contemporary ecclesiastical action (as in the Roman Catholic Church), but even more so the result of an over-objectified understanding of Christ's work. Reacting against the Roman emphasis on subjectively infused grace, the Reformers reverted to an almost exclusively objectified reference to redemptive realities that are external and outside of the Christian believer. Protestant theology has traditionally taught the historically objectified acts of Christ in His death, burial, resurrection and ascension *for us*, i.e. on our behalf. In so doing Christ is also said to have died, rose, and ascended *as us – as* our representative substitute, doing so vicariously in our place. Christ's historical actions become personally efficacious *for us* when we respond by faith (*sola fide*) and Christ assumes our place *as us* before the heavenly Judge, whereupon the Divine Judge pardons and forgives our sins on the basis of Christ's historically objective actions. In this forensic and juridical framework, God the Judge legally imputes the benefits of Christ's righteousness to the Christian, declares we are in right standing with Him, and promises a full inheritance of benefits in the future in heaven. All of this action of Christ is outside of – external to – the believer.

D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones wrote: "Justification makes no actual change in us; it is a declaration of God concerning us."<sup>1</sup> Louis Berkhof explained that both Luther and Calvin describe justification "as a forensic act which does not change the inner life of man but only the judicial relationship in which he stands to God."<sup>2</sup> Anglo-Catholic, E. L. Mascall, notes that "justification has been envisaged as simply an act of God by which man is accounted righteous without any ontological change being made in him."<sup>3</sup> Louis Bouyer, a French Reformed theologian who became Roman Catholic, lamented, "It was apparently impossible for Protestant theology to agree that God could put something in man that became in fact his own, and that at the same time the gift remained the possession of the Giver. That amounts to saying that there can be no real relation between God and man."<sup>4</sup> These quotations serve to verify that the over-

objectification of Protestant theology in general has effectively deterred teaching of the personal and subjective action of Christ in the Christian individual.

A study of the subjective presence and action of the living Lord Jesus *in us, as us, and through us* is, therefore, outside of the pale of most traditional Western Christian theological teaching, for it runs counter to Protestant over-objectification and Catholic over-collectivization. It is important to acknowledge, though, that there have been individuals and groups throughout Christian history (some affiliated with both Catholic and Protestant communities, while others were independent of either) that have given due emphasis to the internal presence and action of the living Lord Jesus in the Christian individual. They have often been labeled as “mystics” or “heretics”, or both, and many of them paid with their lives for non-conformity to the prevailing and acceptable theological opinions. So, beware – this study may be dangerous to your health!

Prior to considering the subjective presence and action of Christ *in, as, and through* the Christian individual, it will serve us well to establish some parameters of historic Christian thought that should serve as safeguards against rampant subjectivism that does not remain grounded in Biblical tradition. Here are seven (7) proposed tenets of Christian teaching that should not be impinged upon by any consideration of the subjective indwelling and function of Christ in the Christian:

- (1) The monotheistic distinction of the Creator God and the creation/creature.
- (2) The Trinitarian unity of Being and function in the Godhead.
- (3) The anthropological responsibility of man to derive spiritually in freedom of choice.
- (4) The harmartiological fall and alienation of man from God in sin.
- (5) The historical space and time foundation of the Christian gospel.
- (6) The Christological singularity of Christ’s person and work as Savior and Lord.
- (7) The soteriological restoration of humanity in regeneration and sanctification.

The institutional Church, at large, has been fearful that an emphasis on the subjective relationship of Christ and the Christian would impinge upon the basic foundations of Christian thought. But even more than this concern for ideological preservation has been their concern for ecclesiastical preservation. The tendencies to collectivization and objectification in the Western Church have allowed the ecclesiastical authorities to exercise power, maintain control, and “keep a handle on” the Christian enterprise. To allow the grace of God to function freely and subjectively in Christian individuals has been eschewed as a “risky business,” allowing for too much individualism, too much subjectivism, and too much personal freedom.

The “good news” of the Christian gospel is that God in Christ is reinvested and restored *in, as, and through* the receptive Christian individual. The objective of the gospel is not to formulate an orthodox belief-system, nor to construct and maintain an ecclesiastical organization. The Spirit of Christ is free to express the character of Christ in novel and spontaneous ways in each Christian, and that unto the glory of God. The Holy Spirit must not be imprisoned in church structures, encased in book-interpretations, or relegated only to a judicial courtroom in the heavens. The Spirit of the living Christ is present *in* the Christian, existing *as* the identity of the Christian, and functioning to express Himself *through* the Christian. The documentation of these realities is the objective of this article.

### **Christ *in us***

Despite the attempts of Protestantism to objectify the benefits of Christ's work in an almost paranoid aversion to anything other than "alien righteousness," there have been evangelical Christians throughout the ages who have understood that the Person and work of Jesus Christ must not be only extrinsically applied, but that the living Person and activity of Christ indwells the spirit of the Christian. This fundamental reality of Christ's actual and spiritual presence within the Christian individual is so well-attested by direct New Testament references that those who "search the Scriptures" and are receptive to spiritual reality invariably recognize the indwelling presence of the living Christ.

Jesus Himself explained that He would give another Helper, the Spirit of truth, and His disciples would know that they were in Him, and He was *in* them (John 14:20). In His prayer for unity Jesus explained that He would be *in* His followers as God the Father was *in* Him, the Son (John 17:23).

The Apostle Paul clearly noted that the mystery of the gospel is "Christ *in* you, the hope of glory" (Col. 1:27). He asked the Corinthians, "Do you not recognize that Jesus Christ is *in* you?" (II Cor. 13:5), unless you are not a Christian. The essential reality that constitutes being a Christian is the indwelling presence of the Spirit of Christ. "If anyone does not have the Spirit of Christ, he does not belong to Him" (Rom. 8:9), i.e. is not a Christian. Continuing his explanation to the Romans, Paul wrote, "If Christ is *in* you,...the spirit is alive 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 *indwells* you" (Rom. 8:10,11). The Holy Spirit, the Spirit of Christ, dwells *in* the Christian (cf. John 14:17; Rom. 8:9-11; I Cor. 6:19; II Tim. 1:14; James 4:5), and "bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God" (Rom. 8:16).

The presence of Christ by His Spirit in the Christian is the presence of Himself as spiritual life in the individual. Christ is life. "I am the way, the truth, and the life" (John 14:6), He told His disciples. There can be no spiritual life apart from His presence. Any reference to the Christian having "eternal life" must be understood by the presence of the One who is life. "He who has the Son has the life; he who does not have the Son of God does not have the life" (I John 5:12). There is no possession of spiritual life apart from the Person who is life. There is no spiritual benefit apart from the presence of the divine Being of God in Christ. There is no salvation apart from the indwelling presence and activity of the risen and living Savior.

Christian teaching has long referred to "spiritual regeneration," but because of its differing theological biases it has often inadequately indicated what this means. To be regenerated is to be "brought into being again" by the reception of divine life in the spirit of an individual. "That which is born of the Spirit is spirit" (John 3:6). Being "born again" or "born from above" (John 3:3,7) in "new birth" necessarily implies that the personified life of the Spirit of Christ comes to dwell *in* the spirit of an individual who is thus constituted as a Christian.

When a person is regenerated a spiritual exchange takes place. The "spirit that works *in* the sons of disobedience" (Eph. 2:2), "the spirit of error" (I John 4:6), "the spirit of this world" (I Cor. 2:12), is exchanged for the "Spirit of truth" (I John 4:6), the "Spirit of God" (I Cor. 2:11,12), the personified presence of the Spirit of Christ who works *in* the Christian (cf. Eph. 3:20; Phil. 2:13; Col. 1:29). The living Lord Jesus explained to Paul at the time of his conversion that this spiritual exchange was a "turning from darkness to light, and from the dominion of Satan to God" (Acts 26:18). Regeneration is a spiritual exchange of spiritual personage *within* the spirit of an individual.

When the New Testament Scriptures refer to “Christ *in* us,” the Greek preposition used is *en*. The primary meaning of this preposition refers to location or place *within* something. This locative meaning adequately explains the presence of the Spirit of Christ located *in* the spirit of an individual. A secondary instrumental meaning of the Greek preposition *en* expands the meaning of “Christ *in* us,” however. Used in this secondary manner the preposition conveys the meaning of “by means of.” Jesus Christ located *in* us is more than a static deposit *in* a particular place *in* the individual. The living Spirit of Christ is always the divine dynamic who acts and functions “by means of” us. Hence, we begin to see that “Christ *in* us” is foundational to “Christ *as* us” and “Christ *through* us.” When the phrase “Christ *in* us” is used in the instrumental or causal sense of “Christ *by means of* us” it begins to anticipate the other phrases, and to merge or meld into the subsequent phrases of this study. This is why “Christ *in* us” is often employed as a comprehensive phrase to convey Christ’s presence and activity in the Christian individual, inclusive of “Christ *as* us” and “Christ *through* us”, as it can also include “Christ *by means of* us.” The explicit New Testament references to “Christ *in* us” lend credence to its use as an all-inclusive phrase of Christ’s presence and function in the Christian.

That Paul meant more by the phrase “Christ *in* you” than just locative placement of the presence of Christ becomes apparent when we examine his statement to the Galatians, “I have been crucified with Christ; and it is no longer I who lives, but Christ *lives in* me” (Gal. 2:20). Christ is *in* us, not merely as a deposit of a commodity called “eternal life,” but Christ *lives in* us as the personified and living function of the dynamic of divine life. If, according to Paul, I am no longer living, and Christ is “*living in* me,” then we begin to understand that Christ is living *as* us.

### **Christ *as* us**

For some readers this will be a phrase they have not previously encountered in popular Christian literature. They may have heard of “Christ *in* us” and Christ *through* us,” but not “Christ *as* us.” Admittedly, there is no explicit use of the phrase “Christ *as* us” in the New Testament, and this makes the phrase suspect in the minds of some Christians. The absence of a direct use of the phrase does not negate its legitimate expression of a Biblical and spiritual concept, however. If that were the case, we would have to deny the use of the words “trinity” and “rapture,” for these are words not used in Scripture, but they most certainly express Biblical concepts and are commonly employed in Christian terminology. In like manner, “Christ *as* us” is a phrase that conveys an important Biblical theme not fully encompassed in the other phrases.

As noted above, “Christ *in* us” refers in its primary meaning to the location and placement of the presence of Christ within the spirit of a receptive individual. In its secondary meaning it refers to “Christ *by means of* us,” but still does not carry with it the connotation of what the believer has become because of the presence and function of Jesus Christ within. Are we merely an occupied spirit-space? Or an invaded spirit-being? Or are we something/someone that we were not before we became a Christian? Did the spiritual exchange create a change in us? When we are regeneratively “brought into being again” are we different than we were previously? Or did we just receive an “eternal life” package by the placement of the Spirit of Christ within the location of our spirit?

The Biblical evidence reveals that the Christian becomes something or someone that he/she was not prior to becoming a Christian. Paul explains that “if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creature; the old things have passed away; behold all things have become new” (II Cor. 5:17). The unregenerate “old man” (Eph. 4:22; Col. 3:9), worthy of death by personal

accountability for sin, “has been crucified with Christ” (Rom. 6:6). Now by spiritual regeneration Christians have become a “new man” (Eph. 4:24; Col. 3:10) in Christ. Christians are transformed from being “a natural man” (I Cor. 2:14) into being “spiritual men” (I Cor. 3:1). Whereas they once were “children of the devil” (I John 3:10) and “sons of disobedience” (Eph. 2:2; 5:6), they are now “children of God” (John 1:12; Rom. 8:16; I John 3:1,2,10) and “sons of God” (Rom. 8:14,17; II Cor. 6:18; Gal. 3:26; 4:6,7; Heb. 2:10). By the presence and function of Jesus Christ within their spirit, believers are identified as “Christians” (Acts 11:26; I Pet. 4:16), indicating that they are Christ-ones.

All of these Biblical expressions and designations evidence the new *identity* of the one in whom Christ dwells and lives. Regeneration, the indwelling presence of the living Lord Jesus, does have the effect of making a person something that he was not before, a “new creature” with a new identity. Who we are as Christians is based on who Christ is *in* us and *as* us, constituting us as Christ-ones. “Christ *as* us” is, therefore, a phrase that expresses our new identity in a way that the other phrases cannot convey.

Some might object that the “Christ *as* us” phrase, dealing as it does with identity, is just addressing a psychological need of modern man to have an individualized sense of self-identity, self-image, self-awareness, self-consciousness, self-concept, self-worth, etc. Not so! The phrase is not used to explain a psychological need or phenomenon, but to explain a spiritual reality of the Christian life that has an abundance of Scriptural statements relating to the fact that the Christian has become something and someone that he/she was not previously. At the very core of our being, in the innermost function of the human spirit, the Christian has become a new person with a new identity. Psychology deals with the distinctive of our individuality in differing personalities, often referred to as a “perceived sense of identity in the psyche,” but the deepest level of identity is always in the spirit of a person, and that in derived association and union with the spiritual being that indwells that person’s spirit.

“Christ *as* us” refers to our identity as Christians by reason of His real spiritual presence and His being who He is in us. “Christ is our life” (Col. 3:4), and Christians “live together with” (I Thess. 5:10) and “through” (I John 4:9) Him. “Christ has become to us righteousness” (I Cor. 1:30). “We become the righteousness of God in Him” (II Cor. 5:21) when we are “created in righteousness” (Eph. 4:24) as a “new man” and are “made righteous” (Rom. 5:19). As “new creatures in Christ” (II Cor. 5:17), Christians are “created in holiness” (Eph. 4:24) and are “holy and beloved” (Col. 3:12) as “holy ones” or “saints” (cf. Rom. 1:7; 8:27; Eph. 1:18; 4:12). In Christ we are “perfect” (Phil. 3:15) and “sanctified” (Heb. 10:14) as “righteous men made perfect” (Heb. 12:23), for Christ “has become to us wisdom and sanctification” (I Cor. 1:24,30).

Jesus Christ becomes the basis of the spiritual identity of the Christian, but we must always understand that this is a derived identity, a derived life, a derived righteousness, holiness and perfection. These are not realities that we have become essentially or inherently in and by ourselves, but only by His presence within us. We are made righteous only because Christ, the “Righteous One” (Acts 3:14; 7:52; 22:14; I John 2:1) dwells and functions *in* us and *as* us. Christians are only said to be “holy” and “perfect” because Jesus Christ is the “Holy One” (Acts 3:14; 4:27,30), the One “made perfect forever” (Heb. 7:28), who has become the basis of our derived identity.

“Christ *as* us” is another way of referring to the Christian’s “union with Christ” which has been a part of Christian understanding from the beginning of the Church. Christian thinkers have often struggled, however, to explain and articulate what Paul meant by his statement, “the one being joined to the Lord is one spirit (with Him)” (I Cor. 6:17). Likewise, they have shied

away from Peter's assertion that Christians "have become partakers of divine nature" (II Peter 1:4). Clinging to the Greek humanistic idea of an inherent "human nature," Christians have often been blinded to the Scriptural explanation that "we were by nature (Greek *phusis*) children of wrath" (Eph. 2:3) in our unregenerate spiritual condition, when "the prince of the power of the air, the spirit that works in the sons of disobedience" (Eph. 2:2) was indwelling and operative in us, but we are now "partakers of the divine nature (*phusis*)" (II Pet. 1:4), by the presence and function of "the Spirit of Christ" (Rom. 8:9) within the spirit of the Christian (cf. Rom. 8:16). Being "partakers (*koinonoi*) of the divine nature" (II Pet. 1:4) and "partakers (*metachoi*) of Christ" (Heb. 3:14) implies that Christians are participants in Christ, sharing in the commonality of His nature and identity in spiritual union with Him. This participatory fellowship (*koinonia*) with the living Lord Jesus (I Cor. 1:9), with God the Father (I John 1:3,6), and with the Holy Spirit (Phil. 2:1) indicates a spiritual union with the Triune Godhead.

This discussion of the Christian's spiritual identity in "union with Christ" raises a question: Is it legitimate to allow the phrase "Christ *as* us" to mean "Christ *is* us"? We have previously noted that Paul wrote "Christ *is* our life" (Col. 3:4) and "Christ has become to us righteousness" (I Cor. 1:30; II Cor. 5:21). Our explanation has been that Christ *is* the basis of our new identity as a "new creature" (II Cor. 5:17) and as a "new man" (Eph. 4:24; Col. 3:10) in Him. Christ *is* the essence of who we are as Christ-ones, as Christians; the essence of our spiritual identity. Does this allow, then, for a legitimate usage of the phrase, "Christ *is* us"? Our logical syllogisms, grammatical phrases, and spiritual understanding must be carefully stated at this point. Though we might say, "Christ *is* us," in a qualified manner, is this to be interpreted in such a way that the equation can be turned around and stated, "We are Christ" or "I am Christ"? Without qualification such statements would be blasphemous! To claim to *be* God the Father, God the Son, or God the Holy Spirit is to claim the essence of deity. This violates the monotheistic premise that who (and what) God is, only God is. To claim to *be* Christ impinges upon several of the seven (7) foundational tenets of Christian teaching that we noted in the introduction to this study, particularly the monotheistic distinction of the Creator and the creature, the Trinitarian unity of the Godhead, and the Christological singularity of Christ's person and work. References to "Christ *as* us" and "Christ *is* us," and statements like "I am Jesus Christ in John Doe form" must be carefully explained so that any implication of the Christian's being equivalent to Christ is avoided. These phrases push the limits of the fine-line of demarcation that allows for a valid expression of the Christian's "union with Christ" wherein Christ is expressed *as* us, and the recognition, on the other hand, that the human individual is always a receptive, contingent and derivative creature distinguished from the essence of the Creator, God.

Previous mention was made to the two major branches of the Western Church, both Roman Catholic and Protestant, and how they have avoided reference to the subjective indwelling of Christ in the Christian individual by the over-collectivization of ecclesiasticism and the over-objectification of a law-based theology. There is another major segment of the Christian Church at large that has been long neglected by Western Christianity. The Eastern Orthodox Church, which includes the Greek, Russian, Cyprian and Serbian national churches, has a sustained history from the commencement of Christianity. This branch of the Church has traditionally cited the statements of the early church fathers concerning the Christian's participation in the divine nature in ways that make the Western Church very uncomfortable. Here are some examples of such statements:

“Our Lord Jesus Christ...became what we are, so that He might bring us to be even what He Himself is.” - Irenaeus c. 180 AD <sup>5</sup>

“The man of God is consequently divine and is already holy. He is God-bearing and God-borne.” - Clement of Alexandria c. 195 AD <sup>6</sup>

“You will be a companion of God, and a co-heir with Christ... For you have become divine... God has promised to bestow these upon you, for you have been deified and begotten unto immortality.” - Hippolytus c. 225 AD <sup>7</sup>

“...from Him there began the union of the divine with the human nature. This was so that the human – by communion with the divine – might rise to be divine. This not only happened in Jesus, but also in all those who not only believe, but enter upon the life that Jesus taught.” - Origen c. 248 AD <sup>8</sup>

“What man is, Christ was willing to be – so that man may also be what Christ is.” - Cyprian c. 250 AD <sup>9</sup>

“God became man so that man might become God.” - Athanasius c. 325 AD <sup>10</sup>

“God has called men ‘gods’ that are deified of His Grace, not born of His Substance.” - Augustine c. 400 AD <sup>11</sup>

The Eastern Church refers to this participation of the Christian in the divine nature as *Theosis* or “deification.” This is strange-sounding terminology to most Western Christians. Eastern Orthodox theologians are careful to explain, though, that neither the early church fathers nor they are advocating that the Christian becomes God. They qualify “deification” by indicating that it is participation in the “energies” of God’s presence and Being, rather than becoming the “essence” of the Being of God. Though they emphasize the intimacy of the union of the Christian with the “divine nature,” they maintain at the same time that the creature always remains essentially distinct from God. They maintain a careful balance of union and distinction.

Protestant evangelicals in the Western Church are reluctantly admitting that the Eastern Orthodox teaching of *Theosis* or “deification” does not impinge upon the foundational teachings of Christianity, such as the seven (7) basic tenets enumerated in the introduction of this study. Robert M. Bowman, Jr., writing in the *Christian Research Journal*, states,

“It may surprise some to learn that a monotheistic doctrine of deification was taught by many of the church fathers, and is believed by many Christians today, including the entire Eastern Orthodox Church. In keeping with monotheism, the Eastern orthodox do not teach that men will literally become ‘gods’ (which would be polytheism). Rather, as did many of the church fathers, they teach that men are ‘deified’ in the sense that the Holy Spirit dwells within Christian believers and transforms them into the image of God in Christ... Thus, it should not be argued that anyone who speaks of deification necessarily holds to a heretical view of man. Such a sweeping judgment would condemn many of the early church’s greatest theologians (e.g., Athanasius, Augustine), as well as one of the three main branches of historic orthodox Christianity in existence today.” <sup>12</sup>

Alan F. Johnson and Robert Webber, theology professors at Wheaton College, write in their book, *What Christians Believe*:

“The first clearly articulated concept of the application of the work of Christ to the sinful human condition is developed in the East... This view is known as *theosis* or deification. ...This does not mean, as it may appear on the surface, that humanity shares in the essence of God. Human persons do not become God. Rather, because the work of Christ destroys the powers of evil, we are freed from those powers and able to come into fellowship with God... His redeemed creatures have been given the benefits and privileges of divinity through grace. The state of grace is seen as a state of communion with God, fellowship with the Trinity, a partaking of the divine.” <sup>13</sup>

F. W. Norris, professor at Emmanuel School of Religion, wrote an article entitled “Deification: Consensual and Cogent” in the *Scottish Journal of Theology*, indicating,

“...patristic theologians offered a remarkable view of what Protestants refer to as ‘restoration’ or ‘fellowship’. These theologians ground it in a sense of Christian salvation: *theosis* or deification. ...No universal Christian consensus demands that one view of salvation includes or excludes all others.”<sup>14</sup>

“Poorly-read Protestants have insisted that the Eastern Orthodox idolatrously make us all little gods or that they think of participation in the divine nature only in physical terms. These charges are false. Orthodox theologians keep deification away from Gnostic or Manichaean speculation, or what we might recognize as the worst aspects of Far Eastern mysticism and now so-called New Age musings.”<sup>15</sup>

“We Christians have the promise of participating in the divine nature. ...Not only Eastern Orthodox but also Western theologians find solace in a sense of deification. Such restoration does not mean that we become God as the Father, Son and Holy Spirit are God. Our participation in the divine nature is in God’s energies, not the essence, a participation through grace accepted in faith which includes being participants in Christ’s sufferings.”<sup>16</sup>

More than any other in the context of recent Protestant evangelicalism, the British missionary statesman and author, Norman P. Grubb, emphasized the truth of “Christ *as us*.” It was the distinctive of his ministry to compel Christians to recognize their spiritual identity in Christ. The titles of his later books reveal this emphasis: *Who Am I?*<sup>17</sup> and *Yes I Am*<sup>18</sup>. Grubb was very careful, however, to emphasize that the Christian’s spiritual union with Christ did not mean “a relationship of total absorption.”<sup>19</sup> “The idea that we can be deified – that is blasphemy,”<sup>20</sup> Grubb wrote. “The essence of idolatry is to claim to be what only God is...”<sup>21</sup> “The creature never becomes the Creator.”<sup>22</sup> “The container never becomes the contents.” “We are the creature, He the Creator, neither one becoming the other.”<sup>23</sup> “Our oneness with Christ does not alter our two-ness.”<sup>24</sup> “The human spirit...can be the container of the Divine Spirit...and yet not lose its own individuality in so being.”<sup>25</sup> “The human is forever the human, and the divine the divine.”<sup>26</sup> In these, and many other ways, Norman Grubb attempted to balance the union and distinction, unity and diversity, oneness and two-ness of the relationship of Christ and the Christian.

Having considered some Biblical bases for “union with Christ” and some theological background of how others have explained participation in the divine nature, it will now be beneficial to return to the consideration of the phrase “Christ *as us*” in order to do a brief grammatical study of the English word “as.” In the English language the word “as” can be employed as an adverb, a conjunction, a preposition, and even as a pronoun. Adverbially, “as” means “equivalent to” or “the same as.” Used adverbially, “Christ *as us*” would mean “Christ is the *same as us*” or “Christ *is as we are* (I am).” Used as a conjunction, “as” means “in the same manner” or “to the same degree.” The “Christ *as us*” phrase would then mean “Christ, in *like manner as us*.” Our utilization of the “Christ *as us*” phrase in this study is primarily considering the word in the prepositional usage, where “as” refers to “function, role or capacity.” “Christ serves *as* the identity of us.” “Christ functions *as us*.” “Christ expresses Himself *as us*.” In like manner as the “Christ *in us*” and “Christ *through us*” phrases are prepositional, we are using “Christ *as us*” as a prepositional phrase also.

“Christ *as us*” means more than “Christ *as if He were us*” in an unreal and hypothetical fashion. The “Christ *as us*” phrase also means more than “Christ, *as it were*, so to speak, us” in a merely figurative and illustrative analogy. If the “Christ *as us*” phrase is interpreted as “Christ, *represented as us*,” we must beware of any implications that Christ is just a sign or symbol represented in our lives, or that the Christian is “playing the part” or “taking the place of” Christ.

On the other hand, there is legitimacy in the interpretation that “Christ is *re-presented as us*” in a contemporary manifestation of His life.

The meaning of the phrase “Christ *as us*,” as used in this study, can be reduced to two (2) primary prepositional emphases: (1) Christ functioning *as us* in terms of the identity of our being. (2) Christ functioning *as us* in terms of the instrumentality of our activity. In other words, (1) Christ expressed ontologically *as us*. (2) Christ expressed operationally *as us*. The first of these has to do with the Being of Christ serving as the basis of the Christian’s being and identity. The second of these has to do with the activity of Christ serving as the basis of the Christian’s expression and behavior. These two aspects of “union with Christ,” ontological union and operational union, are integrally united in the unity of God’s Being and Action. God’s Being is always expressed in His Action, and His Action is always invested with and expressive of His Being. In other words, there can be no detachment or separation in Who God is and what God does. In like manner, our behavior as Christians should be expressive of who we have become in Christ.

Our study of “Christ *as us*” has (to this point) focused primarily on the ontological sense of identity, so we now turn our attention to the operational sense of Christ’s functioning *as us* in behavioral manifestation. Christ operating *as us* in the expression of Himself will eventually begin to merge into the meaning of “Christ *through us*,” but in order to differentiate the emphases we will reserve the “Christ *through us*” phrase for the expression of Christ that extends beyond us to others.

“Christ manifested *as us*” implies the living reality of the presence of Christ *in us*, the basis of our new spiritual identity in our union with Christ *as us*. Christ cannot remain dormant within us as a static deposit of identification. The living Lord Jesus must of necessity express Himself dynamically as who He is in our behavior. The Christian life is not a self-generated expression of moral and ethical behavior that attempts to conform to the example of Christ, and thereby be Christ-like. Rather, the Christian life is the Christ-life, Christ “living in me” (Gal. 2:20), lived out *as us*. Despite the misconceptions that abound in the religious thinking of many Christians today, the objective of the Christian life is not an imitation of the life of Jesus, but the manifestation of the very life of Jesus. Paul wrote to the Corinthians, “We have this treasure (Christ) in earthen vessels (human bodies), that the surpassing greatness of the power may be of God and not from ourselves; ...that the life of Jesus may be *manifested* in our body, ...*manifested* in our mortal flesh” (II Cor. 4:7,10,11). The Christian life is not imitation, but *manifestation of Jesus as us*!

When Christ is expressed *as us*, manifesting His life and character in our behavior, this creates a unique re-presentation (see above) of Christ’s life. Christians are not meant to be carbon copy, cookie-cutter conformists operating in Xerox uniformity. Utilizing our unique individualities and personalities, Christ lives out His life *as us*. This is accomplished in the spontaneity of allowing Jesus to function and express His character in whatever role or capacity we find ourselves, whether as husband or wife, employer or employee, leader or follower, etc. By faith the Christian allows for the receptivity of His active character expressed *as us*.

Ever since the writings of the early church fathers, many have referred to the active expression of “Christ *as us*” as the incarnational reality of Christianity. The historical incarnation of Jesus has often been made analogous to the relationship of Christ and the Christian. It has been noted that God was *in* the man, Jesus (Matt. 1:23; Jn. 17:21), incarnated *as* the man, Jesus (Jn. 1:14; Phil. 2:7-11), and acting *through* the man, Jesus (Jn. 14:10; Acts 2:22). The Christological incarnation of the Son of God is not identical, however, to the expression of

“Christ *as us*.” The incarnation of the Word of God involved the hypostatic union of God and man unified in one person, who was the singular mediator between God and man (I Tim. 2:5) as the God-man. Whenever the idea of incarnation is applied to Christians it must be in a generalized sense of the life and activity of the living Lord Jesus embodied “*in us*” and enfleshed “*as us*” as we functionally express Christ’s life. This does not invalidate references to the contemporary incarnational expression of “Christ *as us*,” but does reveal the necessity of always recognizing the difference between Christ’s incarnation and the incarnational expression of Christ’s life in our behavior.

The process of allowing for the expression of Christ’s life in our behavior is called “sanctification.” To be sanctified is not to achieve a sanctimonious piety by particular religious disciplines or by peculiar conformity of dress and behavior. To be sanctified is, rather, to allow Jesus, the Holy One (Acts 3:14; 4:27,30), who lives *in us as* the basis of our new spiritual identity to express His Holy character in the actions of our behavior. Thus, we are set apart to function as God intended, expressing His Holy character “in spirit and soul and body” (I Thess. 5:23).

A verse often cited to document “Christ’s function *as us*” is found in John’s first epistle. In the context of referring to God’s love being perfected, i.e. brought to its intended end in expression towards others, John writes, “As He is, so are we in this world” (I Jn. 4:17). The contextual meaning seems to be that “just as (*kathos*) Christ is the functional expression of God’s love to others (mankind - cf. Jn. 3:16), so also we (Christians) are the functionally expressive agents of God’s love within the world of mankind where we live.” John’s underlying assumption is that “Christ *as us*” (identity) will express God’s divine love “*as us*” (activity) in consistent expression of the character of God (which is the primary thrust of John’s epistle). This verse does refer to “Christ’s function *as us*” in expressing God’s love, but should not be wrenched from its context to mean “as Christ is in His essential Being, so we are in our essential being.”

Christ functions *as us* by actually and actively living His life in us (Gal. 2:20). Christians are “saved by His life” (Rom. 5:10), and set free to function as God intended and as God energizes. Controlled and “filled with His Spirit” (Eph. 5:18), Christians manifest the “fruit of the Spirit” (Gal. 5:22,23), “the fruit of righteousness” (Eph. 5:9; Phil. 1:11; Heb. 12:11), which is the character of Christ. Again, this is not a character that Christians generate or actuate from their own energies and “works,” but Christian character is only and always derived from Christ. Christians allow for the outworking of Christ’s activity to which they are receptive in faith (James 2:17-26), engaging in “good works which were prepared beforehand that they should walk in them” (Eph. 2:10) as God “works in them that which is pleasing in His sight” (Heb. 13:21). Only by “Christ’s function *as us*” do we “live godly in Christ Jesus” (II Tim. 3:12), to the glory of God (I Cor. 10:31; II Cor. 3:18; I Pet. 4:11), which is the purpose for which we were created (cf. Isa. 43:7).

### **Christ through us**

Jesus Christ functionally expressing His life *as us* necessarily merges into an understanding of “Christ *through us*.” As previously explained, the operational union of Christ *as us*, expressing His life and character through our behavior, was addressed in the previous section, whereas Christ functioning *through us* in extension to other persons will be the focus of our explanation here. These concepts are obviously integrated and should not be made into rigid

categories or definitions. Much of our explanation of Christ's operational function *as* us could just as well have been explained as Christ's functional expression *through* us."

Having noted how the character of Christ is expressed in Christian behavior by "the fruit of the Spirit" (Gal. 5:22,23), we now note that the ministry of Christ is performed *through* us by the "gifts of the Spirit" (cf. Rom. 12; I Cor. 12; Eph. 4:8-16). The "fruit of the Spirit" has to do with the functional expression of the character of Christ, while the "gifts of the Spirit" have to do with the ministry of Christ to others in the context of the Body of Christ. It is most lamentable that in many portions of the Church today the "gifts of the Spirit" are regarded as marks of spirituality or trophies of spiritual possession, rather than as the means of Christ's ministry *through* Christians. The "gifts of the Spirit" should not be viewed as separated or detached entities or abilities, but only as the functional grace-expressions by which Christ ministers *through* any Christian in a given situation of another's need. (cf. Fowler, *Charismata: the so-called "Spiritual Gifts"*)

The ministry activity of Jesus Christ during His historical, earthly ministry was accomplished as "the man Christ Jesus" (I Tim. 2:5) was the "man attested by God with miracles and wonders and signs which God performed *through* Him" (Acts 2:22). Jesus carefully explained that He did nothing of His own initiative (Jn. 5:19,30; 8:28; 12:49; 14:10), but declared, "the Father abiding in Me does His works" (Jn. 14:10). How did Jesus do what He did in His earthly ministry? Even the "miracles and wonders and signs" were what "God performed *through* Him."

Doctor Luke later writes that "the multitude were listening to Barnabas and Paul as they were relating what signs and wonders God had done *through* them among the Gentiles" (Acts 15:12). In like manner as Jesus ministered by being receptive to God's activity *through* Him, the apostles ministered in supernatural ways as God functioned *through* them. Writing to the Romans, Paul explained, "I do not presume to speak of anything except what Christ has accomplished *through* me, resulting in the obedience of the Gentiles by word and deed, in the power of signs and wonders, in the power of the Spirit" (Rom. 15:18,19). This is obviously a very explicit reference to Christ's function *through* the Christian.

The Greek word used in these references just cited is the Greek preposition *dia*, which has a primary and direct meaning of procession *through* an object, place, or person. It often conveys the meaning of extension *through* that goes beyond and out from the object, place, or person. This idea of extension beyond ourselves unto others is important in the understanding of "Christ *through* us" as Christians. A secondary, instrumental meaning of *dia* is "by means of," which allows the word to have the same secondary meaning as the Greek preposition *en*, revealing that these prepositions tend to overlap one another in meaning and must not be treated with rigid precision.

The presence and function of the living Jesus *in, as, and through* the Christian is not for the purpose or objective of making us spiritually bloated "knowers," full of pride in our alleged "spirituality" and what we "know" as Gnostic elitists. The only thing, the only One, we know is Him, Jesus Christ, in an ontological knowing of relational intimacy, rather than an epistemological knowledge of data that merely puffs us up in arrogance (I Cor. 8:1). The One we know is Jesus. Jesus is God (John 10:30). God is love (I John 4:8,16). God as love is a Self who has no needs and exists only for others, expressing Himself in grace and love and givingness. Therefore, when Jesus functions *in* us, and *as* us, and *through* us, He is always expressing Himself in grace and love for others.

In the Epistle to the Hebrews it is written, “Christ always lives to make intercession...” (Heb. 7:25), for His is a permanent priesthood (Heb. 7:24). In that case, He must live *in* us, and *as* us, and *through* us to make intercession for others. Christians have long advocated “intercessory prayer” for others, but seldom have they considered what it means to engage in “intercessory lives” or “intercessory ministry” for others. The intent of God in Christ was to provide for “a kingdom of priests” (Exod. 19:6) who would function as a royal intercessory priesthood (I Peter 2:9) as “priests of the Lord and ministers of God” (Isa. 61:6) for others. Christians are that kingdom of priests (Rev. 1:6; 5:10), wherein the sacrificial and intercessory character of God is to function for others.

Without thought for Himself, Jesus “laid down His life” (John 10:17,18; I Jn. 3:16) for others, and as He lives *in* and *through* the Christian He will continue to express the same self-sacrifice, self-surrender, and self-giving that is inherent in God’s character. As Christians “lay down their lives for the brethren” (I Jn. 3:16), it is not for the same redemptive and propitiatory purpose which was singularly fulfilled by the Person of Christ, but the same willingness to be an expendable investiture for others remains. Christians thereby begin to recognize that participation and fellowship (*koinonia*) with Christ is not only the commonality of union with Him in an identity that expresses itself *as* us, but also involves participating in “the fellowship (*koinonia*) of His sufferings” (Phil. 3:10). As Paul invested himself in ministry unto others, he indicated that he was “filling up what was lacking in Christ’s affliction” (Col. 1:24) because Christ continued to suffer *in* and *as* him. “The sufferings of Christ are ours in abundance” (II Cor. 1:5), but “we suffer with Him that we might be glorified with Him” (Rom. 8:17), Paul wrote in other letters. “Christ through us” involves being willing “to stand in the gap” (Ezek. 22:30) for others, recognizing that our present physical bodies and lives are expendable since we have the spiritual continuity and perpetuity of Christ’s eternal life.

“Christ *through* us” is the extension of Christ’s ministry *through* Christians. The objective of that ministry is not for self-indulgent progression unto knowledge or spirituality, but is always Christ giving Himself to and for others *in* us, *as* us, and *through* us.

### **Conclusion**

The phrases we have considered in this study, “Christ *in* us,” “Christ *as* us,” and “Christ *through* us,” are not necessarily to be understood as progressive, successive or sequential steps or stages of spiritual knowledge or spiritual growth. Though we have differentiated between them, they often meld and merge into an integrated and comprehensive emphasis of “Christ *by means of* us,” as this is a permissible interpretation of all three prepositions. We should avoid analyzing the meaning of these three phrases too precisely or rigidly, allowing the living reality of Christ to express Himself as He will. It is questionable whether the realities that these phrases refer to should be cast into separate theological categories as some have done, attempting to represent them as justification, sanctification, and glorification; or as regeneration, unification, and ministration. Even illustrative analogies such as John’s reference to “children, young men, and fathers” (I John 2:12-14) are best avoided, as these are often misleading.

When an individual is regenerated by the receipt of the Spirit of Christ into his/her spirit (Rom. 8:9), Christ is *in* that person, immanently indwelling them; Christ forms their identity, functioning *as* them, for Christ cannot help but act as the Being that He is; and Christ is living *through* them, laying down His life in intercessory ministry for others.

Despite the caution of defining these internal spiritual realities too precisely, the following differentiations may be helpful for general definition. “Christ *in* us” has to do with indwelling; “Christ *as* us” has to do with identity; “Christ *through* us” has to do with intercession. The preposition “in” refers to location; the preposition “as” refers to function; the preposition “through” refers to extension. “Christ *in* us” points to *Presence* – the real *presence* of the living Lord Jesus *in* our spirit; “Christ *as* us” suggests *Identity* – His presence establishes our new *identity as* Christ-ones; “Christ *through* us” implies *Expression* – Christ’s presence and function necessitates His *expression through* us unto others.

In conclusion let us note that Paul wrote of the Corinthians “being manifested as a letter of Christ, ...written not with ink, but with the Spirit of the living God...on tablets of human hearts” (II Cor. 3:3). Christ living *by means of* us creates a unique living epistle that *re-presents* Christ to others in the contemporary form of our own lives. Such a presentation of Christ *in* us, and *as* us, and *through* us, may be the only living form of Jesus that another person may ever observe. This adaptation of another’s verse seems to capture the point poetically:

“Christ is writing a letter *in* you each day.  
The message, that is Him, must be true.  
‘Tis the only Jesus that some men will see –  
The life of Christ expressed *as* and *through* YOU.

## FOOTNOTES

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