

Mutual Identity: Christ and Man

Because we are physical and our perceptions are through the physical senses, we have little comprehension of spiritual beings. We can observe the effects of the spirit in a physical body but we cannot detect man's spirit outside the physical body. Watching persons as they died, I have been unable to see or sense the spirit or soul leaving the body but the effect of it was evident.

God is Spirit unseen by human eye. *"No one has ever seen God; only the Son, who is in the bosom of the Father, he has made him known"* (John 1:18). The eternal Word, not a being of flesh, identified with fleshly man in order to accommodate man's limited perception. *"And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us"* (John 1:14). He was so identified with the Father that he could tell Philip, *"He who has seen me has seen the Father"* (John 14:9). In order to accommodate our physical perceptions, God took on a nature which was not his own. In doing this he became mortal and vulnerable to sin and death like us. He would die bodily to give us some comprehension of his spiritual death for us. The wages of sin is death, death of the soul, not the body (See Rom. 6:23; Ezek. 18:4, 20; Isa. 53). The omnipresent God limited himself to mortal human form.

Mark reveals, *"John the baptizer appeared in the wilderness, preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins"* (Mark 1:4). Matthew 3 tells of the people crowding to John to be baptized of him. Among them, there was an unlikely candidate for baptism. It was Jesus who had no sins to confess or to be forgiven. Why was he baptized? *"It is fitting for us to fulfil all righteousness,"* was his response. We may not understand exactly what he meant by that, but one thing seems to be clear. He was identifying with sinful man. It was then that the Spirit attested his sonship even while in his mortal state.

But he did have sins to be forgiven. In identifying himself with sinful man, he became the personification of sin. *"For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God"* (2 Cor. 5:21). Christ was identifying with man while God was identifying with Christ. *"God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting to us the message of reconciliation. So we are ambassadors for Christ, God making his appeal through us. We beseech you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God"* (5:19-20).

While in this state of identity, deity did "his part" in reconciling man. Yes, there is "his part" and "our part!" His part is grace; our part is acceptance of it. The title of this essay, "Mutual Identity," may seem redundant but this identification is bilateral. So, now sinful man must take action to accept God's invitation to identify with deity and "be reconciled to God." How can that be accomplished?

We must identify with him in his death, burial, resurrection, and new life. In review of his own life, Paul explained, *"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"* (Gal.

2:20). As Jesus willingly approached the crucifixion, so we willingly repent when we *“Put to death therefore what is earthly in you ... seeing that you have put off the old nature with its practices...”* (Col. 3:5-11). Paul was not crucified on the cross with Christ literally; neither can we be. Were we figuratively on the cross with him? No, we had not been born, nor had we sinned, at that time. Then, when do we make this identification with his crucifixion?

Paul explains this beautifully. *“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, so that as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life.”* In our baptism we identify with Jesus’ baptism for remission of sin as he identified with sinners in his baptism and then was acknowledged as God’s son. Symbolically, we were buried with him in his tomb rather than he being buried with us in water. In baptism, we are transposed, as it were, back nineteen centuries identifying with his death, burial, and newness of life.

We bury dead persons. If one is made alive before this identifying in baptism, the whole symbolism is lost. If we are “baptized into Christ,” as Paul states, then we are forced to conclude that we were not “in Christ” before baptism. If one can be saved out of Christ, then persons may come to God other than through Christ and his one body. Paul teaches that we are baptized into his one body which is his church (1 Cor. 12:13; Eph. 5:23).

This identification is further described by Paul: *“For if we have been united with him in a death like his, we shall certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his. We know that our old self was crucified with him so that the sinful body might be destroyed, and we might no longer be enslaved to sin. For he who has died is freed from sin. But if we have died with Christ, we believe that we shall also live with him. For we know that Christ being raised from the dead will never die again; death no longer has dominion over him. The death that he died he died to sin, once for all, but the life he lives he lives to God. So you also must consider yourselves dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus”* (Rom. 6:3-11. Please read the entire context.) Those who would deny the essential nature of baptism lose the beauty of truth about our mutual identity, that is, of deity with us and we with deity.

To the Colossians Paul expressed similar thoughts: *“If then you have been raised with Christ, seek the things that are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth. For you have died, and your life is hid with Christ in God. When Christ who is our life appears, then you also will appear with him in glory”* (Col. 3:1-4). It would be at his “appearing” (“parousia”) that they would be glorified. But what of their state in the meantime? They had neither attained nor been given immortality. Though they were identified with Christ, there were many warnings and exhortations because of their vulnerability.

Declaring that disciples are not immortal is shocking to some. Paul indicated that we must seek immortality (Rom. 2:6). Immortality dwells in deity alone: *“To the King of ages, immortal, invisible, the only God, be honor and glory for ever and ever.”* And the *“only Sovereign, the King of kings and Lord of lords, who alone has immortality and dwells in unapproachable light, whom no man has ever seen or can see”* (1 Tim. 1:17; 6:16).

When are we made immortal? Paul answered that question decisively for those awaiting the coming of the Lord (“the parousia”): *“For the trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised imperishable, and we shall all be changed. For this perishable nature must put on the imperishable, and this mortal nature must put on immortality. When this perishable puts on the imperishable, and the mortal puts on immortality, then shall come to pass the saying that is written: ‘Death is swallowed up in victory.’”* (1 Cor. 15:53-54). That immortality is not given in the “new birth,” or “newness of life.” Those are figurative expressions. This terminology was introduced to Nicodemus in clarifying to him that his fleshly birth into Israel, visible and attested by physical attributes, gave him no claim in the spiritual, invisible kingdom. His change of allegiance would be like a birth into a new spiritual Israel verified by his baptism and spiritual fruits in his life.

While I am mortal, I am vulnerable. Much of the message of the epistles addresses the necessity of continued faith and holy living and warning against the pitfalls and snares that prevent entrance into the eternal kingdom.

That does not mean that we are hapless and helpless victims always in doubt of our true identification with God in Christ. Some favorite promises of Jesus are: *“My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me; and I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish, and no one shall snatch them out of my hand. My Father, who has given them to me, is greater than all, and no one is able to snatch them out of the Father’s hand. I and the Father are one”* (John 10:27-30). While we maintain our identity in God, we can be assured that no one can overpower him in order to destroy us. This comforting passage, however, must not be over-played. His words must not be shaded to mean, “My sheep once heard my voice and they once followed me, etc.” Continuous discipleship is necessary and, though no power can snatch us out of his hand, we can choose to deny the faith or live a life of rebellion or fleshly indulgence. No, the Spirit will not lead us to do those things, but disciples are also warned against quenching the Spirit.

I will insert a parenthetical diversion of thought for further study. Paul wrote that *“God sent his Son ...to redeem those who were under the law...”* as part of his mission (Gal.4:1-7). In fact, it was to the Jew first, and also to the Greek. Could it not be that “my sheep” and “all who you have given me” refer to the righteous of Israel both past and then living? He had declared that he also had “other sheep” than the Jews being addressed, evidently referring to Gentiles (10:16; See Ch. 17). Jesus’ prayer in John 17 may take on a whole new perspective read with this in mind. There he prayed, *“I do not pray for these only, but also for those who believe in me through their word, that they may all be one... .”* That would result in both ancient Israel and Gentiles being identified with Christ in one body.

Surely, the apostle, Paul, himself did not live in abject fear but, in recognition of the possibility of his own failure, he admitted, *“I pommel my body and subdue it, lest after preaching to others I myself should be disqualified”* (1 Cor. 9:27). As the deliverer, Moses, failed to reach the promised land, so the ambassador of Christ to the Gentiles might also fall short.

Then, in the next chapter, he recalls how that of the great community of Israel identified with Moses, most were overthrown in the wilderness because they displeased God after their deliverance from Egypt. After detailing their sins of grumbling, idolatry, and immorality, he concluded, *“Now these things happened to them as a warning, but they were written down for our instruction, upon whom the end of the ages has come. Therefore let any one who thinks that he stands take heed lest he fall.”*

Having emphatically warned the disciples of their vulnerability, Paul then calmly assures them that they were not living in helplessness, for *“No temptation has overtaken you that is not common to man. God is faithful, and he will not let you be tempted beyond your strength, but with the temptation will also provide the way of escape, that you may be able to endure it.”*

Continued identification with Christ enables the disciple to escape the pitfall of sin until at last the spirit leaves this mortal habitation and is given immortality in eternal identity with deity who is Spirit.

(Cecil Hook; May 2002) []