

# THE TRINITY REVIEW

For though we walk in the flesh, we do not war according to the flesh, for the weapons of our warfare [are] not fleshly but mighty in God for pulling down strongholds, casting down arguments and every high thing that exalts itself against the knowledge of God, bringing every thought into captivity to the obedience of Christ. And they will be ready to punish all disobedience, when your obedience is fulfilled.

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## “In Christ”

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This simple prepositional phrase (in the Greek, ἐν Χριστῷ) has been the occasion of much theological confusion and error over the centuries. In one of its contemporary manifestations, this confusion takes the form of replacing the distinct and perfectly intelligible order of salvation – the foreknowledge, predestination, effectual calling, justification, and glorification of *Romans* 8:28-30, for example – with a nebulous and unintelligible notion called “union with Christ.” A contemporary example of this error, and the attack it involves on Reformed theology and the doctrine of justification by faith alone, is Richard Gaffin’s theology, expressed in his book *Resurrection and Redemption: A Study in Paul’s Soteriology*.<sup>1</sup> I shall quote Gaffin at length, just to avoid the suspicion that I have quoted him out of context. Gaffin writes:

A comparison between the structure of Paul’s soteriology and the traditional *ordo salutis* [order of salvation] lacks the exclusively [note well] eschatological air which pervades the entire [note well] Pauline soteriology.<sup>2</sup> Or, to put it the other way around, the former point of view [that is, the traditional Reformed *ordo salutis*] amounts to a definite de-eschatologization of Paul’s outlook. For him [Paul] soteriology is eschatology. All soteric experience derives from solidarity in Christ’s resurrection and involves existence in the new creation age.... Nothing distinguishes the traditional *ordo salutis* more than its insistence that the justification, adoption, and sanctification which occur at the inception of the application of redemption are separate acts. If our

[Gaffin’s] interpretation is correct, Paul views them not as distinct acts but as distinct aspects of a single act. The significant difference here is not simply that Paul [note well] does not have the problem that faces the traditional *ordo salutis* in having, by its very structure, to establish the pattern of priorities (temporal? logical? causal?) which obtains among these acts. Even more basic and crucial is the fact that the latter [the traditional *ordo salutis*] is confronted with the insoluble [note well] difficulty of trying to explain how these acts are related to the act of being joined *existentially* [Gaffin’s emphasis] to Christ. If at the point of inception this [existential] union [with Christ] is prior (and therefore involves the possession in the inner man [note well] of all that Christ is as resurrected), what need is there for the other acts [justification, adoption, sanctification]? Conversely, if the other acts are in some sense prior, is not union [with Christ] improperly subordinated and its biblical significance severely attenuated, to say the least? The structure and problematics of the traditional *ordo salutis* prohibits [*sic*] making an unequivocal statement concerning that on which Paul stakes everything [note well] in the application of redemption, namely union with the resurrected Christ [137-139].

The union, the being joined to Christ, in view here is primarily experiential [note well] in nature. It is a union which is constitutive [note well] as well as descriptive of the actual existence of the individual believer.... [I]n Paul’s soteriology the realization of redemption in the experience of the individual, both in its inception and in its continuation, is based on the *experience* [Gaffin’s emphasis] of being joined to Christ [50-53].

[H]ow can what he [Paul] says about God’s forensic activity with respect to the sinner be harmonized with his teaching on subjective renewal? The sometimes complicated treatment of this problem can be passed over here, because, as usually posed, it is a false one. It rests on the incorrect assumption that in Paul there are distinct strands of soteriological teaching, each

<sup>1</sup> Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Company, 1987. The book, based on Gaffin’s doctoral dissertation at Westminster Seminary in 1969, was originally published as *The Centrality of the Resurrection* in 1977. Sinclair Ferguson, another member of the Westminster Seminary faculty, lavishly praises it in the Foreword. Gaffin, of course, is the senior faculty member at Westminster Theological Seminary in Philadelphia.

<sup>2</sup> I think that Gaffin means to say, not that the comparison lacks the “exclusively eschatological air,” but that the traditional *ordo salutis* lacks that air. His next sentence seems to confirm this.

involving separate divine acts, when in fact, because of the solidarity involved, what characterizes the redemption of Christ [note well] holds true for the redemption of the believer. [T]he justification, adoption, sanctification, and glorification of the former [Christ] take place by and at his resurrection.... This means, then, that, despite a surface appearance to the contrary, Paul does not view the justification, adoption, sanctification, and glorification of the believer as separate, distinct acts but as different facets or aspects of the one act of incorporation with the resurrected Christ [130-131].

In these paragraphs one can clearly see

(1) not only the supreme importance Gaffin assigns to “existential” and “experiential” union with Christ (Paul “stakes everything” on it, he says); but also

(2) his denial of the Biblical and Reformed *ordo salutis*;

(3) his assertion that “soteriology is eschatology”;

(4) his assertion that the Biblically differentiated and distinct moments of salvation – effectual calling, regeneration, justification, adoption, sanctification and glorification – are not distinct acts, but “facets” or “aspects” of one unitary act, which is “existential, experiential incorporation into the resurrected Christ”;

(5) that Christ himself is redeemed; and

(6) that sinners existentially and experientially incorporated into Christ possess “in the inner man all that Christ is as resurrected.”

Gaffin’s nebulous and unintelligible notion of existential and experiential incorporation into Christ gives rise to his peculiar doctrine that Christ is himself redeemed. In Gaffin’s soteriology, existentially incorporated sinners share in Christ’s own redemption. They are redeemed because Christ is redeemed. This un-Biblical notion of union with Christ also gives rise to a denial that justification is a distinct and purely forensic act. Justification is merely an “aspect” or “facet” of the all-important “incorporation into Christ.” Gaffin shares soteriological ground with Norman Shepherd, which explains why Gaffin has been Shepherd’s most faithful defender for nearly 30 years.

Mystics – and there is a glowing mystical aura surrounding Gaffin’s “existential, experiential union with Christ” – have waxed poetical, even pornographic, about union with God/Christ. Gaffin spares us the pornography. Contemporary theologians, including some who claim to be Reformed, are returning to this Antichristian mysticism. The Neo-orthodox, with their doctrine of the believer’s encounter, union, and co-temporaneity with Christ in his death and resurrection, are still another example of this revival of mysticism in Reformed garb.

The contemporary assault on the Biblical doctrine of justification by faith alone started by the faculty of Westminster Seminary in the 1970s rests in part on this unintelligible and un-Biblical doctrine of “existential union

with Christ.” One of the effects, and it is an intended effect, of this false doctrine is to make our salvation depend, not on the objective, extrinsic perfect righteousness of Christ imputed (not infused) to those who believe the Gospel, but on some sort of subjective, existential, experiential “union with Christ” in which there is a merging or incorporation of sinners and Christ. Salvation then becomes a result of infused righteousness (rather than imputed righteousness) and subjective (rather than objective) obedience.

Notice in the quotation from Gaffin his assertion that sinners possess “in the inner man all that Christ is as resurrected.” That means, among other things, that sinners subjectively and experientially possess the perfect righteousness of Christ by virtue of their existential union with him, and thus are “justified.” Gaffin agrees with John Henry Newman (later Cardinal), as well as his modern disciples Hans Kueng and Karl Barth, that “to declare righteous is to make righteous,” if, Gaffin says, we understand resurrection “to be the common denominator” (131), a stipulation that Newman, and perhaps Barth and Kueng, would certainly accept. Newman’s emphasis on the centrality of the resurrection pre-dated Gaffin’s by more than a century.

Not only do the Scriptures teach a forensic view of soteriology (*law, covenant, sin, righteousness, guilt, condemnation, justification, pardon, and adoption* are all legal terms), but the Scriptures are neither mysterious nor mystical. God’s Word is not nebulous or unintelligible. The unintelligible notion of existential and experiential incorporation into Christ is foreign to Scripture.<sup>3</sup>

There is a sense, actually two senses, in which the phrase “united to Christ” may be accurately and Biblically used. Both senses are quite distasteful to proponents of Neo-medievalism. Believers are united to Christ intellectually and legally. Intellectually, because “we have the mind of Christ,” that is, believers think and believe the same propositions Christ thinks, the propositions he has revealed in his Word.<sup>4</sup> Legally, because Jesus Christ is the legal representative of and substitute for his people, the federal head of his race, as Paul argues at length in *Romans* 5. What Jesus Christ did in his life, death, and resurrection is imputed to believers, as if they had done it, and their sins are imputed to him as if he had done them. Believers do not die with Christ “existentially” or “experientially,” but legally. They do not possess Christ’s perfect righteousness “in the inner man.” Christ’s

<sup>3</sup> This notion of “existential incorporation” also lends support to sacramentarianism. Baptism and the Lord’s Supper are seen as the means by which the sinner is initially incorporated into Christ, and by which he remains united (through eating and drinking “Christ”) with Christ on a continuing basis. Sacramentarianism is hardly distinguishable from the beliefs of savages.

<sup>4</sup> The Vantilian school of thought, to which Gaffin belongs, denies that the Creator and the creature can think exactly the same thoughts. Of course, there is no Biblical warrant for this opinion. How could there be? If the thought is God’s thought, mere men cannot think it. The Vantilian doctrine is self-refuting.

righteousness is imputed, not infused. His act and righteousness are legally, not experientially, theirs. Their sins are legally, not experientially, his. Christ's suffering and death are imputed to believers, and we are freed from the penalty of death for our sins. By substituting "existential" and "experiential" union with Christ for the Biblical doctrines of intellectual and legal union, Gaffin has fabricated an entirely un-Biblical soteriology. Tragically, he has been indoctrinating future pastors in this heterodox nonsense for at least three decades.

Since part of the confusion and error of the theologians is traceable to their failure to understand the simple Greek preposition *en*, I have collected discussions of the phrase "in Christ" from two of Gordon Clark's books. It will become clear to the attentive reader how close the connection is between the clarity and precision of propositional revelation in the Bible, and the doctrines of God, man, sin, and salvation.

### **Commentary on Ephesians 1:6**

*...to the praise of the glory of his grace by which he blessed us in the beloved...*

GHC: The translation "in the beloved" conveys no distinct meaning. Taking the preposition as causal rather than local, one understands that God has blessed us *by* or *through* the agency of Christ.

### **Commentary on Ephesians 1:7**

*...in [by] whom we have the redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of sins, according to the riches of his grace.*

GHC: Once again, the causal sense of *en* is more intelligible than the local. The means which God in his grace uses is the death of Christ. It is through the shedding of his blood that we obtain forgiveness. Note that this redemption and forgiveness are not some subjective experiences of sinners; they are the actions of Christ.

Comment: Note that Clark, unlike Gaffin, carefully distinguishes between "actions of Christ" and the "subjective experience of sinners." Such careful distinctions are necessary for the preservation and propagation of the Gospel of objective, imputed righteousness and forgiveness of sins.

### **Commentary on Ephesians 2:13**

*But now by Christ Jesus you who were once afar off have become near by the blood of Christ.*

GHC: This place is as good as any for the consideration of the phrase "in Christ." It occurs in many of Paul's epistles, and we have already seen it here in 1:3 (*in him*), 6 (*in the beloved*), 7 (*in whom*), 10, 11, 13, 20, and 2:5..., 6, 7, 10, and now 13. Some of these instances are easily understood, but others have led exegetes to adopt a mystical interpretation. An early medieval theologian used iron and fire as an illustration. We merge with God as the fire impregnates the iron to such an extent that we cannot

tell whether it is iron or fire. Thus we permeate God, or better, God permeates us. Less explicit, some Neo-orthodox writers, as I have indicated elsewhere, try to modify the doctrine of election by charging Calvinists with failing to notice that election takes place "in Christ." This not only misrepresents Calvinists, but in itself lacks meaning. Various Baptists, as also noted elsewhere, insist that *en* must be local, as *in a room*. In addition to being poor Greek, the insistence on the locative meaning makes nonsense of scores of verses. Others, regarding themselves as orthodox and very devout, impose a mystic aura on the phrase, and lapse into rapturous vacuity.

In reply to all, we must insist that the rational God gave us a rational message that we are obligated to understand, or at least try to understand. All Scripture is profitable for doctrine. Of course, as Peter complained about Paul, the Scriptures contain material hard to understand, but they contain nothing but what is understandable. Now then, what is the meaning of "in Christ"? Different passages may indeed use slightly different meanings; but probably the large majority of puzzling passages become clear when *en* is translated by *by*. That is, *en* often denotes agency or means. Here the phrase means simply that Christ brought us near to the commonwealth of Israel, the covenants, and the promise. In other places *en* will indicate that Christ is our legal representative, so that his act counts as ours.

Comment: The "mystic aura" that some theologians throw around this phrase is not restricted to this phrase. They misinterpret other Scriptural words and phrases in order to generate more mystic auras. They simply do not understand what Christianity is.

### **Commentary on Ephesians 2:22**

*...you also are being built into a habitation of God by the Spirit.*

GHC: I frequently translate *en* as *by*, indicating agency rather than locality. The reason is not mainly to avoid the Baptists' poor Greek, but to avoid the mystics' unintelligible verbiage.

### **Commentary on Colossians 1:1**

*Paul, apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, and Timothy our brother, to the saints in Colosse, brethren who believe in Christ...*

GHC: Some commentators object to the translation "brethren who believe in Christ." They have two reasons. First, the word in question [*pistois*] is not a participle, that is, "who believe"; it is an adjective and should be translated *faithful*. Second, the preposition *en*, "in" Christ, does not indicate Christ as an object of belief, but rather refers to the Christians' incorporation into the body of Christ. A spiritual union, not an object of belief, is the idea [they say].

This view is not without merit. But neither is it altogether convincing. As for the preposition *en*, instead of *eis*, "into," or *epi*, "upon," we shall see that it has several meanings.

Surely in verse 4 it means faith in Christ. In addition to the connotations of Greek prepositions, if the idea were that of a spiritual incorporation, the word *pistois* would be superfluous. Simply “brethren in Christ” would be quite enough. Therefore, it makes better sense, to the present commentator at least, to take Christ as the object of their belief.

## Commentary on Colossians 1:4

*...having heard of your faith in Christ Jesus...*

GHC: As with verse 2, some commentators, even here in verse 4, wish to see some sort of spiritual incorporation (a contradictory phrase, if there ever was one), rather than the object of belief. But here, even more clearly than in verse 2, the latter idea is obvious. Various prepositions can follow the idea of belief. One cannot properly say that *eis* or *epi* must be used. One can better argue that this verse demonstrates that *en* is quite possible.

The word *pistis* means *faith*, and the verses commentators cite to make it mean *faithfulness* do not always prove their point. For example, in *Matthew* 8:10 [“I have not found such great faith, not even in Israel!”], 9:2 [“When Jesus saw their faith”], and 9:22 [“Your faith has made you well.”], the people who had *faith*, had had no time to be *faithful*. Faithfulness takes a long time; faith does not. The woman touched the hem of his garment because she *believed* something about the nature and power of Christ; not because she had discharged many obligations faithfully. Her faith is called *great* because she was so thoroughly convinced of the truth she believed. Just as clear are *Matthew* 9:28-29 [“Do you believe that I am able to do this? According to your faith let it be to you.”] (see *Matthew* 15:28 [“O woman, great is your faith!”]). *Matthew* 21:21[“if you have faith and do not doubt”], contrasting faith with doubt, also allows no time for faithfulness. Even in *Matthew* 23:23 [“justice and mercy and faith”], where faith might seem to mean long obedience, the fact that the matters of obedience are mentioned separately might indicate that faith is an additional factor. In this regard, note that the Pharisees did not *believe* Moses (*John* 5:46-47 [“For if you believed Moses, you would believe me; for he wrote about me. But if you do not believe his writings, how will you believe my words?”]). They were not the fundamentalists of Christ’s day; they were the Modernists. The Sadducees were outright humanists.

[Clark adds a footnote to his comments:]

This type of anti-creedal objection [the type that says that *faith* means *faithfulness*] is more vigorously leveled against the Old Testament. The Hebrew word, say some commentators, means *faithfulness* or *firmness*, and not *belief*. When it is pointed out to them that the LXX [*Septuagint*] translators, who used Hellenistic Greek, used the word *pisteuo*, they lamely reply that the Alexandrian rabbis were “obviously embarrassed.” James Barr, a scholar of unquestioned heterodoxy, writes, “The

unwillingness of much modern theology [in contrast with the “fundamentalist” type of thinking] to admit that belief or faith can be properly given to a saying or words, or its tendency to insist that such belief in something said is totally different in kind from faith understood as a relationship with a person, may also affect the exegesis here” (Barr, *The Semantics of Biblical Language*, 172).

Comment: The attempt to obliterate the Biblical concept of belief (*pistis*) by saying it means faithfulness or obedience is a direct attack on the Gospel, on the doctrine of justification by faith alone, and an integral part of the “union with Christ” mysticism.

## Commentary on Colossians 1:14

*...in whom we have redemption....*

The Greek preposition *en* frequently means *by*. This really makes better sense here. Christ is the agent of our redemption – he accomplished it. If anyone prefers the usual translation *in*, it must be understood in a metaphorical sense, difficult to explain. A. S. Peake argues, “not *by* whom, but *in* whom; if we possess Christ we possess in him our deliverance.” This, of course, begs the question. What Peake has done is to define the word *in* by the word *in*. What he should have done is to explain how deliverance can be *in* Christ, as in a room, rather than *by* Christ as an agent. Therefore, *by* is better.

## Commentary on Colossians 1:28

*...that we may present every man perfect in Christ...*

GHC: Some recent theologians have made considerable use of the phrase “in Christ.” It is not easy to know what sense they attach to it. There are instances where they insist that predestination must always be “in Christ,” as if the Reformers thought otherwise. One not so radical commentator wrote, “The phrase ‘perfect in Christ’ does not simply mean perfect in knowledge...as Chrysostom and Calvin supposed.” He then tries to describe it as “fellowship with him” and “in likeness to him.” But are we not like Christ if we have the mind of Christ? There is no objection to using the phrase “like Christ”; but it is better to know in what particulars we are or will be like him. Calvin did not use such vague expressions. To be mature is to have an extensive *knowledge* of Christ. Since God would not have put a means in Paul’s hands insufficient to attain God’s and Paul’s purpose, and since the means was the preaching of Pauline theology, it follows that maturity is a knowledge and belief in those holy doctrines.

Comment: The Biblical doctrine of intellectual and legal union with Christ is rejected by the mystics. They prefer an unintelligible experiential and existential incorporation into the resurrected Christ. They hope their students mistake unintelligibility for spirituality. Thus they attack the Gospel and Christ.