

# A New Creation in Christ

2 Corinthians 5:16–17

by Mike Riccardi

## Introduction

We return to our study of 2 Corinthians 5, so please turn there with me in your Bibles. I want to begin this evening by asking you: What makes someone a Christian? There's a lot of confusion over the answer to that question—even within the church. What makes someone a Christian? At the most fundamental level, what does it mean to be a follower of Christ?

Many people would say that what makes someone a Christian is family tradition or heredity. If your parents and grandparents were Christians, well then you're born "Christian." Others would say that it's good manners, politeness, and a pleasant attitude is what makes someone a Christian. Someone who says "Please" and "Thank You," "Yes sir," and "No ma'am"—*that's* what it means to be a Christian. Others would say that being a Christian means you fight for the betterment of society; Christians fight poverty, feed the hungry, and devote themselves to working for social justice. Still others identify Christianity with a political party; if you're a Republican, well, you must be a Christian. If you're for limited government and economic conservatism, and against abortion and homosexual marriage, well then you're a Christian.

Some people are little bit more "religious" in their definition of a Christian. They might say that being a Christian is living a changed life—the reformation of our morals. A Christian, they'd say, is someone who doesn't cheat on their spouse or on their taxes, someone who doesn't abuse alcohol or drugs, or someone who doesn't use foul language. Other people would say that the fulfillment of religious duties makes a Christian. You're a Christian if you read your Bible, pray to Jesus, sing worship songs, and attend church. Others say it's a matter of fearing God's judgment and believing that Jesus died on the cross to save us from hell. Still others would say it's feeling bad about your sin that makes you a Christian. Everyone sins, but the ones who feel guilty and know what they're doing is wrong—those are the true Christians.

But I am here to tell you this evening that none of those things *makes* a person a Christian. Not a one. Now, it's true that Christians mourn over their sin. It's true that Christians read Scripture, pray, and are members of a local church. It's true that Christians are faithful to their spouses, don't give themselves to drunkenness, and discipline their tongues. Christians do live change lives, are polite to others, and love their neighbors as themselves. But not a one of those things *makes* them a Christian. Christianity isn't so *natural* of a religion, that you can be a Christian if you clean up your life and your language, parrot out a few memorized phrases, and show up at church once a week!

Man's problem isn't that our thinking, or our speech, or our behavior, or our politics just need to be refined a little here and there. No, something is so fundamentally wrong with us that Jesus says in John 3 if we are to have any hope of seeing the kingdom of God, we must be born all over again. The call of the Gospel isn't behavior modification. Sin has so infected and corrupted mankind that nothing less than the wholesale renovation of the soul is required for salvation. As Charles Spurgeon aptly observed, "The Scripture does not say, 'Ye must be *improved*,' but 'Ye must be *born again*.'"

What makes a person a Christian—what truly distinguishes a genuine believer in Jesus from those who are unsaved—is *regeneration*. The spiritual recreation of one dead in sin—the divine impartation of spiritual life into the soul of the sinner. God speaks of the reality of regeneration in the New Covenant promise of Ezekiel 36:26 when He says, "I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit within you; and I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh. I will put My Spirit within you and cause you to walk in My statutes, and you will be careful to observe My ordinances."

What makes someone a Christian is the spiritual heart surgery performed by Almighty God, wherein He removes your sinful heart of stone and totally transforms you, from the inside out, so that your thinking, your desires, your tastes, your affections, your wills, are entirely renewed. Your spiritual eyes, once blind to the glory of Christ, have been opened to behold the ugliness of sin and the beauty of holiness as it is comprehended in Jesus. The sin that once tasted sweet now brings nothing but bitterness. The sin that was once so alluring and satisfying has no pull on your affections; it's lost on you. And the righteousness and the virtue you once had no taste for is now what you hunger and thirst after. The Christian is the one who has been regenerated—made an entirely new creation—from the inside out.

And in our text this evening, the Apostle Paul has something to teach us about the Christian's experience of regeneration. And his comments come in a section of his letter where he speaks of the **driving motivations** in his life that fuel and empower him for radically sacrificial ministry. And two weeks ago, we took an extended look at one of those driving motivations that he identifies in verse 14—namely, the love of Christ. He says, "For the love of Christ *controls* us." Paul is compellingly motivated—he is absolutely driven—by Christ's love for His people as displayed in the Gospel. And then, meditating on that love, he goes on to describe key components of the Gospel—that Gospel which so brilliantly displays the love of Christ for His people.

He speaks of the doctrine of substitution—the doctrine that "One died for all"—that the one man, Christ, died *on behalf of*, or *in the place of* His people, as our Substitute, the One who extinguishes the righteous wrath of the Father against our sin by suffering that punishment in our

place. He speaks of the doctrine of solidarity, or of representative headship. Paul says, “. . . one died for all, therefore all died.” That is, there exists such a union between Christ the Head and His people His Body that when He died to sin on that cross, so also did His people die to sin. And when He rose to newness of life, so also did His people rise to newness of life in Him. And he speaks of the doctrine of sanctification in verse 15—that the very purpose of God’s saving grace by which we are justified in Christ is that we might display His glory by living a life of practical righteousness in obedience to Him. Or, as Paul puts it, “that they who live might no longer live for themselves, but for Him who died and rose again on their behalf.”

And as Paul continues meditating on the glorious theological truths of the Gospel by which the love of Christ is displayed, he turns to the doctrine of **regeneration**. The sanctification of verse 15—of no longer living unto ourselves but unto Christ—is the result of the radical inward transformation of *regeneration*, which he addresses in verses 16 and 17, our text for this evening.

Follow along with me in your Bibles as I read 2 Corinthians chapter 5, verses 16 and 17. Paul writes, “Therefore from now on we recognize no one according to the flesh; even though we have known Christ according to the flesh, yet now we know Him in this way no longer. Therefore if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creature; the old things passed away; behold, new things have come.”

This text teaches us that when you become united to Christ by faith, one of the results of that union is, verse 16a, that the way you view other people is entirely transformed, because, verse 16b, the way you view Christ is transformed. And your view of *Christ* is transformed, because you yourself have been transformed—because regeneration transforms the entirety of who you are. And because, in my mind, it’s easier to reason from cause to effect than from effect to cause, we’re going to treat verse 17 first, where Paul describes regeneration, and then verse 16 after it, where he outlines two results of regeneration. And so that will make a three-point outline. We’ll consider, first, that the Christian is **a new creation**; second, that he has **a new view of Christ**; and third, that he has **a new view of others**.

## **I. A New Creation (v. 17)**

First, in view of his union to Christ, the Christian is said to be **a new creation**, verse 17. Paul says, “Therefore if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creature; the old things passed away; behold, new things have come.”

Notice: if anyone is *in* Christ—if anyone has become *united* to Jesus Christ by saving faith in the Gospel, if anyone has died to sin and self *in union with* the One who died to sin once for all—he is **a new creation**. There are no exceptions. This is definitional. There is no such thing as an unregenerate Christian. There is no such thing as being united to Christ in salvation without

having been transformed, from the inside out, by the work of the Holy Spirit. The definitive, distinguishing mark of every true believer in Jesus is that he is regenerate, that he has been born again, that he is **a new creation**.

And we need to be a new creation in Christ! As we said before, something was so fundamentally wrong with us, that we need to be *re-created*! The Apostle John records Jesus' words that we need to be born all over again! Paul puts it plainly in Titus chapter 3. He says in Titus 3:3, "For we also once were foolish ourselves, disobedient, deceived, enslaved to various lusts and pleasures, spending our life in malice and envy, hateful, hating one another." This is the natural man's miserable condition. How are we going to get out of it? Clean up our act? Modify our behavior? Reform our morals? No, man by his nature is so hopelessly corrupted by sin that he must look entirely outside of himself for salvation. And that is precisely Paul's answer: Titus 3:4, "But when the kindness of God our Savior and His love for mankind appeared, He saved us, not on the basis of deeds which we have done in righteousness, but according to His mercy, by the washing of *regeneration* and *renewing* by the Holy Spirit, whom He poured out upon us richly through Jesus Christ our Savior."

He says something very similar in Ephesians chapter 2. As he reminds the church in Ephesus of who they were before salvation, he says, Ephesians 2:1, "And you were dead in your trespasses and sins." Not injured; not sick. *Dead*. Though we possess *physical* life from the moment of conception, from that very same moment, because of our union with Adam, we are utterly devoid of any *spiritual* life. We are spiritual corpses! He goes on in verse 3: "We ... all formerly lived in the lusts of our flesh, indulging the desires of the flesh and of the mind, and were *by nature* children of wrath." This is what man is by nature. Nothing at all has to happen to us to make us this way. By nature we are children of wrath; we are born in such a way that, if nothing and no one were to intervene, we would be just recipients of the wrath of God against our sin.

And once again I ask: What is the remedy for such a hopeless condition? A laundry list of religious duties by which we seek to earn the favor of God? Impossible! What duties can a dead man perform? How can someone dead in trespasses and sins raise himself to life? He can't! The one thing we need most is entirely outside our power to perform! And that's why Paul goes on to say in the next verse, Ephesians 2:4: "But God, being rich in mercy, because of His great love with which He loved us, even when we were dead in our transgressions, *made us alive* together with Christ. By grace you have been saved!"

You see, sin has so infected the totality of our being—our minds, our hearts, our wills: all of us—that we come into this world spiritually dead. All our faculties are corrupted by sin. We are spiritually blind; Paul says in 2 Corinthians 4:4 that "the god of this world has blinded the minds of the unbelieving so that they might not see the light of the Gospel of the glory of Christ." We are spiritually deaf; Jeremiah 6:10 says that our ears are uncircumcised and we cannot listen, and

Jesus said in John 8:47, “You cannot hear My word.” Not only are we blind and deaf, but our will and our affections are disordered and enslaved to sin; Jeremiah 17:9 says, “The heart is deceitful above all else and is incurable.” As we’ve already seen from Ezekiel 36, Scripture says that the natural man’s heart is a heart of stone, cold and unresponsive to the meaning and glory of divine truth. Sin has so pervaded our nature as to leave no part of us untouched by its corruption! We need to be born again! We need to be regenerated and renewed! We need to be made alive! And in Christ we find God’s grace suited precisely to our need: “If anyone is in Christ, he is **a new creation.**”

And in chapter 4 verse 6, Paul likens this work of *new* creation to God’s work of the *original* creation. 2 Corinthians 4:6 says, “For God, who said, ‘Light shall shine out of darkness,’ is the One who has shone in our hearts to give the Light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ.” Just as in the beginning, God said, “Let there be light,” and by the creative power of His Word the galaxies leapt into being, in regeneration, God sovereignly speaks into the darkened and dead heart, “Let there be light,” and instantaneously births the light of eternal spiritual life where it had not existed. He cures spiritual blindness with the light of the glory of Christ. He opens the ears of deaf with His sovereign call to life. He removes the heart of stone and replaces it with a heart of flesh. He renews the affections so that the new man hates sin and loves righteousness. You see, just as depravity was total—just as no part of our nature escaped the corruption of sin—so also is regeneration total: no part of our nature escapes the washing of regeneration and renewal of the Holy Spirit.

And I want you to notice precisely how Paul talks about regeneration in this verse. The phrase that the NAS translates, “he is a new creature,” is a smoothing out of the original. If you have the New American Standard you’ll notice the words “he is” in italics, indicating that they weren’t in the original language. Literally, the Greek reads like this: “Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, *new creation!*” It’s an exuberant interjection, like Paul could barely contain himself as he wrote! “If anyone is in Christ, *new creation!*”

And in using that phrase, it’s unmistakable that Paul wants to draw an inseparable connection between the regeneration of sinful individuals and the coming renewal of the entire creation. In fact, if it wasn’t for the very individualizing language at the beginning of the verse—“if *anyone* is in Christ”—it would have been very natural to hear Paul’s reference to the “new creation” as a reference to the new heavens and the new earth. And those two concepts aren’t unrelated in Scripture. In fact, while the concept is spread throughout the New Testament, the Greek word for regeneration is only used in two verses. One is Titus 3:5, which we’ve quoted several times already this evening. But the other is in Matthew 19:28, where Jesus speaks about the time of His second coming as “the regeneration.”

And further still, Romans 8 explicitly ties the regeneration of the creation to the regeneration of mankind. Romans 8:19 says, “For the anxious longing of the creation waits eagerly for the revealing of the sons of God.” So the sin-cursed creation is waiting eagerly for the time when the children of God will be revealed as what Christ has redeemed them to be. Then he says, “For the creation was subjected to futility, not willingly, but because of Him who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself also will be set free from its slavery to corruption into the freedom of the glory of the children of God.” So, just as the *curse* of creation was intimately bound up with the curse of man (the creation was cursed when man sinned), so also is the *redemption* of creation inextricably tied to the redemption of man: the creation will be freed from the curse of sin when man is freed from the curse of sin.

The implications of this are astounding. What is happening in the renewal and recreation and regeneration of a sinner when he comes to Christ is nothing less than the prefiguring and in-breaking of that final renewal and recreation and regeneration of the entire cosmos! You see, Christ didn’t come only to save souls; He came to save the entire creation. There is coming a day when Christ will return, and this entire world will be purged of its sin and evil through the judgment of fire, and will be recreated into the most blessed paradise, to be a suitable habitation for the redeemed of God.

Revelation 21 says there is coming a time when the present heaven and earth will have passed away; a time when every wrong will be made right, when every ounce of evil will be eradicated, when every tear will be wiped from the eyes of God’s children, when there will be no more death, no more mourning, no more pain. And as Scripture speaks of that time, it tells us what God will say on that day, Revelation 21:5: “Behold, I am making all things new!” Well, what does Paul say in our very verse? “If any man is in Christ, *new creation!* The old things have passed away; *behold*, new things have come!” Do you see, friends? Salvation by grace through faith in Christ—regeneration by the Holy Spirit—is nothing less than a microcosm of the redemption of the entire cosmos! Nothing less than the glory of the new heavens and the new earth breaking in to this present evil age in the reborn soul of the believer in Christ! O how great a salvation with which we have been saved!

And just as there is an unspeakable difference between this creation and the next, so also is there an unspeakable difference between the unregenerate sinner and the one who has been re-created in the likeness of Christ. The old things have passed away; behold, new things have come. All of our blindness, all of our deafness, all of our deadness, all of our uncleanness, has been nailed to the cross! Psalm 103:12 says, “As far as the east is from the west, so far has He removed our transgressions from us!” Dear Christian, was your life before Christ one of great shame, of gross immorality, of uncommon wickedness? Was there fornication and adultery? Was their drug abuse and imprisonment? Was there sexual perversion? I tell you if you are in Christ, you are a new creation! The old things have passed away; behold! new things have come! You have been

transformed from the inside out! You have been clothed in the righteousness of Christ, and are being progressively conformed into His image. You can cut all ties with your past and live in the freedom of the new creation!

And if you are outside of Christ this evening, and you are laboring under the burden of sins such as those, I just invite you to run to Christ, who opens His arms and says, “Come to Me, all you who are weary and heavy-laden, and I will give your rest.” Turn from your sins and lay them at the cross of Christ. Trust in Him for forgiveness and for righteousness, because it’s only by saving faith *in Him* that anyone is made a **new creation**.

## II. A New View of Christ (v. 16b)

Well, those glorious truths provide just a glimpse into what regeneration is. It is to become an entirely new creation. As we move to our **second point**, working backwards from verse 17 into verse 16, we want to consider what regeneration results in. And we see **two results** that Paul focuses on in verse 16, the first of which is that becoming a new creation necessarily leads to a **new view of Christ**. Let’s read verse 16, focusing especially on the second half of the verse. Paul writes, “Therefore from now on we recognize no one according to the flesh; *even though we have known Christ according to the flesh, yet now we know Him in this way no longer.*”

What does Paul mean when he says we have known Christ *according to the flesh*? He means that he once regarded Christ from a fleshly point of view, according to worldly standards, paying special attention to the way things looked outwardly and externally rather than internally and spiritually. There was a time in Paul’s life when he judged Christ “in accordance with the standards and values that derive from living as if physical life in this world was all that exists” (Hafemann, 242). There was a time in Paul’s life when he looked upon Jesus as a poor, uneducated, vagrant—the illegitimate son of a carpenter from the no-name city of Nazareth (“Can any good thing come out of Nazareth?”) in “Galilee of the *Gentiles*.” He saw Him as a self-appointed pseudo-rabbi who was an anti-Law, anti-Moses insurrectionist and Messianic impostor. Paul saw Jesus as a weak, suffering criminal, a crucified heretic who died deservingly under the curse of God, whose followers were delusional fanatics that needed to be systematically imprisoned and executed.

Yes, Paul *had* known Christ after the flesh—he regarded and judged Him in a fleshly manner. “Yet now,” he says, “we know Him in this way no longer.” Paul’s own experience of regeneration caused him to come to an entirely **new view of Christ**. When God shone the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ into Paul’s heart, He also shone a light from heaven into his eyes that knocked him to the ground on the Damascus Road. And though Paul’s physical eyes were blinded for the next three days, his spiritual eyes were opened for the very first time. The scales that would fall from his physical eyes just a few days later had fallen

from his spiritual eyes when he met the risen Christ. And in that moment, when the Lord God gave Paul eyes to see, and ears to hear, and removed his heart of stone and replaced it with a heart of flesh, the first thing that changed about Paul was his evaluation of who Christ was.

Now he saw. Though he knew Christ according to the flesh at the start of that day, now he knew Him that way no longer. In the blazing light of heavenly glory, Paul saw that the Jesus he'd been persecuting was the long-awaited Messiah, the Holy One of God, the coming One, the Savior of Israel. He was not a crucified criminal, but the resurrected Lord of all creation. He was not the illegitimate son of a carpenter; He was the Son of the living God. He *was* crushed under the weight of God's wrath, but not for His own sins, but as the Substitute and Great High Priest for those who would believe in Him. He was the supremely glorious, surpassingly valuable Savior for whom Paul would eventually suffer the loss of all things and count them but refuse so that he might gain this priceless treasure who is Jesus Christ (cf. Phil 3:8).

This is the first result of regeneration. When Almighty God issues His sovereign decree for light to shine forth in the heart that is dead in sin, when the eyes are opened and the ears unstopped, when the heart of stone becomes a heart of flesh, the first thing that changes is the sinner's **view of Christ**. The natural man regards Christ according to the flesh. He's just a puritanical killjoy who threatens to punish you if you don't do everything He says. Or He's a man who was deified by His followers whose character is a made-up psychological crutch so that weak people can cope with their emotions. Or He's just boring and uninteresting. And you know, it doesn't even have to be negative; you can have an altogether positive evaluation of Christ, and yet have it be a fleshly evaluation. So many today conceive of Jesus as a great moral teacher, an exemplary philosopher, an inspired prophet, a nonviolent political protestor worthy of imitation, or just a good example of how we ought to sacrifice ourselves for the sake of those we love.

But every one of those evaluations—positive and negative—has something in common. And that is: the unregenerate man looks at Jesus and does not see the magnificent, matchless glory of the only begotten Son of God. The dead heart looks at Jesus—the most glorious person in the universe—and sees no beauty! No divine loveliness! Maybe a little bit of admiration; He's a great teacher. But not the thrilling, compelling, satisfying Savior that He is! Regeneration changes that.

Let's look again at 2 Corinthians 4. In verse 4, Paul describes the unregenerate person when he says, "The god of this world has blinded the minds of the unbelieving so that they might not see the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God." *This* is the sinner's problem. *This* is what it means to be dead in trespasses and sins—not that you're motionless or stagnant, but that you are devoid of the spiritual life that allows you to see the value of the glory of Christ that is revealed in the Gospel. The essence of spiritual death is spiritual blindness to the glory of Christ. Our spiritual perception is so disordered by sin that we look upon what is

objectively delightful—namely, the glory of Jesus—and we’re repulsed by Him; and yet we see what is repulsive—namely, the glory of sin and of self—and we’re enamored with it. We love darkness and hate the light. We love filth and despise beauty.

But then, God shines the light of life into the blind heart, verse 6: the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ. He gives us new spiritual eyes so that we finally see sin for what it is—in all its objective ugliness—and finally see Christ for who he is—in all his objective beauty and glory. And with our eyes finally opened, finally able to see and evaluate things as they actually are, we turn away in repentant disgust from the filth of sin and self, and we cling to our glorious Savior with the embrace of saving faith! Peter, James, and John went up to the Mount of Transfiguration with a Jesus they viewed according to the flesh. But when Christ as it were peeled back the veil of His human flesh, and His face shone brighter than the sun and His garments were whiter than any launderer could whiten them, the disciples knew Him after the flesh no longer. Luke 9:32 says, “They saw His glory.”

Well in the same way, everyone who experiences the miracle of regeneration beholds a transfiguration of Christ with the eyes of their heart. And whatever your fleshly evaluation of Him was, the veil over your heart is lifted, and you behold Him as glorious! God of very God! Fully God and fully man! The only mediator between God and man! The Lamb of God, our Substitutionary sacrifice! Our merciful and faithful High Priest, who has propitiated the Father’s wrath, and who *ever* lives to make intercession for us! The resurrected and victorious One, conqueror of sin and death! And above all: the supremely *lovely* One—glorious in holiness, clothed in the beauty and splendor of divine majesty. One who is more satisfying than all that life can offer, and all that death can take!

Dear friends, have you beheld Him as He is? Has the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ invaded the dungeon of your depraved heart and opened your eyes to His beauty? Is He your pearl of great price? Your treasure hidden in a field? The One for whom you would gladly suffer the loss of all things? Oh, if not, dear sinner, cry to Him! Get on your face and lift your voice to heaven that God might be merciful to you, and reveal to you the glory of His Son!

### **III. A New View of Others (v. 16a)**

The very first result of regeneration—of being made a new creation in Christ—is that you are given a new view of Christ. A **second result** of regeneration, the **third point** in our outline this evening, is **a new view of others**. Look again with me at the first half of verse 16. Paul writes, “Therefore from now on we recognize *no one* according to the flesh.”

This is so important. If we know much about Christian theology at all, we know that regeneration results in a changed view of Christ. But what we don't often hear, and think about, and meditate on, is that when we are transformed from the inside out in regeneration, and our assessment of Jesus changes, so does our assessment of everyone else in the world. You see, in regeneration, our entire person has been renovated. The old things *have* passed away; new things *have* come—in every aspect of our life. One commentator puts it this way. He says, “When a person becomes a Christian, he or she experiences a total restructuring of life that alters its whole fabric—thinking, feeling, willing, and acting” (Harris, 434). Pastor John says, “Old values, ideas, plans, loves, desires, and beliefs vanish, replaced by the new things that accompany salvation. . . . God plants new desires, loves, inclinations, and truths in the redeemed, so that they live in the midst of the old creation with a new creation perspective” (196). This is that wrecking-ball of regeneration that I spoke about two weeks ago. When you become a new creation in Christ, all your goals and hobbies and ambitions and joys in life are like a building that has been leveled to the ground by this wrecking ball of regeneration! And in its place is an entirely new creation, built by the Spirit of God on the foundation of Christ—with new tastes, and new affections, and new joys, and new ambitions.

And along with all of that newness, comes also new ways of assessing other people—new canons of appraisal, new standards according to which we arrive at our estimation of people. Just as Paul once knew Christ according to the flesh—just as he once esteemed or appraised or evaluated Him according to the world's preoccupation with the outward appearance—so also he “recognized” or “regarded” or “viewed” or “appraised” or “valued” *other people* according to the flesh as well. “But,” he says, “from now on”—that is, since the time of his regeneration and conversion to Christ—“from this point forward, we recognize *no one* according to the flesh.” The one who is united to Christ and has become a new creation in Him has put off those fleshly canons of appraisal which judge men only on the basis of superficial, external matters.

And I am so jealous for us to understand the implications of this and to apply them to our lives. Far too often, Christians have not distinguished themselves from unregenerate persons in their personal standards of judgment and evaluation of others. We appraise people on the basis of their physical attractiveness; we tend to be more pleasant to and engaging with people we find physically attractive as opposed to those we don't. We appraise people on the basis of their style of dress; we're impressed with a well-tailored suit or a nice dress, but wonder why the guy in a t-shirt and jeans can't dress up for church! We judge people on the basis of their educational achievement; when somebody says, “I have a Master's degree in this,” or “I have my doctorate in that,” we say, “Oh, wow!” We judge people on the basis of their social status—the house they own, the cars they drive, the clothes they wear. We judge people on the basis of their eloquence, their athletic abilities, their level of “success” in the business world, their political affiliation. And one of the saddest truths concerning the visible church is that so many professing believers

still allow their opinions of others—and their understanding of their own identity—to be shaped by their ethnicity, by the color of their skin.

Friends, the Holy Spirit of God, by the inspiration of this very text of Sacred Scripture, is telling us that none of those things has any place in the mind of the one who has been regenerated and united to Christ! None of them! They are not the basis by which we evaluate *others*, and they are not the sources from which we derive our *own* identity. No, in Christ “there is neither Jew nor Greek!” In Christ “there is neither slave nor free!” I mean, think about what a radical statement that is from the pen of Saul of Tarsus! This was the most promising young rabbi in Jerusalem, educated under Gamaliel, supervising the persecution and execution of Christians. This is the one circumcised the eighth day, of the stock of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; a Pharisee, a persecutor, and blameless according to the ceremonial law (Phil 3:4–6)! Time was when his only canon of evaluation was whether or not someone met the strict Pharisaical standards of Mosaic ceremonialism. If he did, he was a *brother*; and if he didn’t, he was a *dog* (Phil 3:2). And now: “There is neither Jew nor Greek!”

What happened? I’ll tell you what happened: Regeneration happened! Listen to Galatians 6:15. The one who boasted in his eighth-day circumcision says: “For neither is circumcision anything, nor [is] uncircumcision [anything]; [the only thing that matters is] a *new creation*.” Jew or Gentile, circumcised or uncircumcised: doesn’t matter. Your ethnicity doesn’t matter; your religious rituals don’t matter. What matters is whether or not there has been a new creation! What matters is: Is this person regenerate or not? Is he united to Christ or not? Is he a child of God or not? Colossians 3:10 and 11: Paul says we’ve laid aside the old self, and have put on the new self—the old has gone and the new has come. And that new self is “being renewed to a true knowledge according to the image of the One who created him—a renewal in which there is no distinction between Greek and Jew, circumcised and uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave and freeman, but Christ is all, and in all.”

The regenerate man has been so dominated by Christ that the only point of reference for his view of anyone is whether or not they were in Christ! The new view of Christ that is born in those who have been made a new creation necessarily issues in **a new view of others**. This reaches even to the level of family. At the end of Matthew chapter 12, Matthew records an incident where Jesus’ mother and brothers were waiting to speak with Jesus after He finished teaching the crowds. And lets Jesus know: “Your mother and brothers are waiting for you.” And His response is just stunning, Matthew 12:48: “But Jesus answered the one who was telling Him and said, ‘Who is My mother and who are My brothers?’ And stretching out His hand toward His disciples, He said, ‘Behold My mother and My brothers! For whoever does the will of My Father who is in heaven, he is My brother and sister and mother.’” You see, Jesus regarded no man or woman after the flesh—not even His own family. What mattered is whether or not they believed in Him.

Nationalism means nothing. You have a deeper connection to true Christians in Iraq, in Iran, in Syria, in Afghanistan, than to any unbeliever in America! Ethnicity is nothing. You have a more intimate union with genuine believers who are black, white, Asian, Hispanic, than to any unregenerate person who shares the color of your skin! Even family, in comparison to Christ, is nothing. Jesus says He has a thicker bond with the children of God than He does even with His own mother! Now, family remains. Ethnicity remains. Gender distinctions remain. But all of those things are absolutely inconsequential in determining one's status before God or his place within God's kingdom (Storms, 164).

And any time we look at a man or woman and allow their appearance, their dress, their financial portfolio, their résumé, or their skin color to determine our estimation of them, brothers and sisters, we are regarding one another according to the flesh. We are behaving as if we have not been transformed by the miracle of regeneration.

### **Conclusion**

The man or woman in Christ is a new creation—one who has been totally transformed from the inside out, starting with his view of Christ and reaching even to his view of everyone else. This is what it means to be regenerate, to be born again, to be a Christian. And friends, the question you need to ask yourselves as you hear these descriptions of the true Christian is: “*Am I a new creation? Have I experienced this radical disruption of everything in my life? Has the Holy Spirit leveled to the ground everything I sought my identity in? Has He given me new eyes to see the glory of Christ? Has He given me ears to hear the wisdom of divine truth? Has He removed my heart of stone and given me new desires, loves, inclinations, and ambitions? Has He given me a heart of flesh that hates sin and that loves righteousness? Is Christ precious to me? Is sin repulsive to me? Have I renounced evaluating others on the basis of fleshly externals? Have I renounced seeking my identity in those things as well? Am I a new creation?*”

If not, dear friend, don't try to convince yourself that there is spiritual life where there is only death. Don't try to fabricate this new creation by trying to work to clean up your life. You can't engineer the radical, supernatural change that must take place in your heart! You can't raise yourself from the dead! Come to *Christ* in repentance and faith. Only He can accomplish what you need. Only He can make you alive. The final verse of our chapter declares, “The Father made Christ who knew no sin to be sin on our behalf, so that we might become the righteousness of God in Him.” And so as His ambassadors, as though God were making an appeal through us; we beg you: be reconciled to God through faith in the person and work of Christ.