

III. Living into the Gospel

Solomon observed that “as a man thinks in his heart, so is he” (Proverbs 23:7). Because human beings live in their own minds, reality is, for them, what they perceive and believe it to be. This means that, to the extent that their perceptions and thoughts deviate from what is actually true and real, they find themselves living false, counterproductive and even destructive lives.

This dynamic is true even of Christians. They, too, live in their own minds, and this is why the Spirit’s work in the individual believer is to *renew his mind* – that is, to conform his perception, thoughts and understanding to the mind of Christ (cf. Romans 12:1-2; 1 Corinthians 2:16). Though Christians possess *in substance* the mind of Christ, their labors in “growing up in Christ” must focus on cultivating and enhancing that “mind”; they must focus on “putting off the old man” and “putting on the new man” who has “being renewed to a true knowledge according to the image of the One who created him” (Colossians 3:9-11; cf. Ephesians 4:17-24).

This labor of the mind is what it means for the Christian to live a life of continual *repentance*: Repentance pertains, not to conduct and behavior as such, but to the exercises and convictions of the mind. The Christian’s solemn and abiding duty is to set his mind and heart on things above; he is to consciously discipline his mind to hold fast to the truth and implications of his new life in Christ – the fact that “he died and his life is now hidden with Christ in God.” Applying himself in this way to “put on the new man” will result in a new *perspective* – and therefore a new *conduct* – with regard to the various facets of his life in this world (Colossians 3:1-17).

And if the Christian’s new identity, nature and life as a “new creation” are revealed and informed in the gospel, *it follows that living an authentically holy and pleasing life as a Christian involves living into the gospel*. This, in turn, means that personal ignorance or neglect of the gospel insures a weak, infirmed and perhaps even fraudulent Christian life.

These considerations highlight the critical importance of knowing and living into the gospel – as it truly is; as it is unfolded in the scriptural account from Genesis to Revelation. It also explains why the professing body of the Church is largely infantile, weak, worldly and irrelevant.

- Perhaps the majority of people who profess Christ have no real understanding of the gospel beyond a handful of isolated tract statements effectively devoid of any context.
- This superficial conception of the gospel results in Christians concluding that it pertains to *unbelievers*: The gospel tells non-Christians how they can get “saved” in order to go to a wonderful place called “heaven” when they die.
- Conceived in this way, the gospel becomes entirely *personal*, pertaining to individual people and their need to address their sin and “get right with God.”
- Thus the gospel is typically viewed in *legal* as well as personal terms: It is treated as the means by which people escape their guilt and future condemnation.

Conceiving the gospel in this reductionistic manner results in two critical failures:

- 1) *It leaves people failing to recognize the creation-wide import and effect of Christ's work.*
- 2) *It leaves them unable to discern the present implications of that work, namely the fact of the present new creation and all it introduces and implies.*

This simplistic “tract” mindset and failure to grasp the gospel and its significance have many tragic consequences, but perhaps the worst is the effect it has on individual Christians. First of all, the gospel becomes effectively irrelevant to them. Conceived as a series of truths for getting people saved, *a person moves on from the gospel once he has come to faith in Christ* – except, of course, with respect to his evangelism.

Christians effectively lose the gospel when they believe it's for the unsaved, but *infinitely more so when they fail to recognize that it defines and determines all they are and all that they do.*

- The gospel answers the questions of meaning and purpose, not only for the unsaved and searching, but also for those in Christ.
- Furthermore, it informs every aspect of Christian life and practice.

Living the Christian life means living into the gospel. To the extent that a Christian minimizes or misconceives the gospel, to that extent he insures that he will fall short of living with authenticity and integrity – *of living into “the truth as it is in Jesus”* (cf. Ephesians 1:18-23 with 4:17-24).

Living into the gospel implicates the totality of the Christian's life and practice, and so pertains to three distinct arenas: *personal life, life in the Church, and life in the world.*

A. The Gospel and New Creation

The first arena is fundamental because it involves who the Christian is in himself, and *who* he is determines *how* he is: “As a man thinks in his heart, so is he.” The gospel – *and nothing else* – provides the Christian with an accurate self-understanding, and the heart of the gospel is its proclamation of a new creation.

1. The New Creation as Identity and Existence in the Last Adam

The Christian life is determined and defined by “Christ-likeness.” Christ-likeness doesn't mean acting like Jesus, but sharing in His life and likeness through union with Him by His indwelling Spirit (Romans 8:9-11; Galatians 2:20; Colossians 3:1-3).

- a. The Christian has been translated from one domain to another. *Christ has brought the former age (the age of the First Adam) to its ordained end, and Christians are those who've entered into the new age of the Last Adam.*
- b. The everlasting eschaton – the kingdom of God – has been inaugurated and Christians are those human beings who have entered into it.

- c. This kingdom is the realm of the new creation – the realm of creational renewal and reconciliation; *thus entering it involves sharing the new humanity of the New Man.*

Thus being a Christian doesn't mean *Christ in my life*, but *Christ who is my life* (cf. John 6:24-58 (esp. 48-53); Ephesians 2:1ff).

Being a Christian means God scripting us into His “story” – His purpose and outcome for His creation – not us writing Him into ours.

2. The New Creation as Already/Not Yet

- a. God has fulfilled His purpose for His creation in Christ – He has delivered it from the curse of estrangement and desolation and reconciled it to Himself.
- b. He has fulfilled His purpose and brought His people – and the whole creation – into that fulfillment (2 Corinthians 5:17).
- c. Fulfillment is complete, but *fruition* is not.
 - The creation has been delivered and reconciled by Christ's cross, but is not yet materially renewed (Romans 8:18-22).
 - So Christians are renewed and reconciled sons of God, but not consummately so; it doesn't presently appear what they shall be (1 John 3:1-2).
 - Likewise the Seed of the Woman has dealt the serpent his fatal blow, but this conquered foe has not yet been destroyed (cf. Luke 11:14-22; John 12:31; Hebrews 2:14-15; Revelation 12:1ff).
 - The heavens and earth have been reconciled to God, but individual men still continue in their state of enmity (2 Corinthians 5:17-21). Christ has brought reconciliation, but every human being must personally enter into it.

These truths have two crucial implications for the Christian's self-understanding and personal life:

- 1) *The Christian must perceive himself as a partaker in the new creation.*
 - a) Being a Christian isn't about doctrinal understanding (as such), moral and ethical reform or religious commitment.
 - b) It is about passing from *death* to *life* – not the “life” of unending existence, but of renewal and reconciliation: “life” that is re-creation in the likeness of God through personal, spiritual, everlasting union with Him in Christ (Ephesians 4:20-24).
 - c) Living the Christian life is about *repentance* and *obedience*, but in the correct sense:

It is about continually and consciously directing our minds to the truth of who we are and then conforming our lives to that reality.

2) *The Christian must apply himself to his progress in Christ-likeness.*

- a) He must consciously strive to “*put on the new man*” (Ephesians 4:17-24).
- b) He must discipline himself to “*walk in the Spirit*” – to discern the Spirit’s work of forming Christ’s true humanity in him and yield himself to it (Galatians 5:16-25).
 - He does so because this is who he is: *man of the Spirit* – the “dwelling of God in the Spirit” (cf. Romans 8:9-11; 1 Corinthians 3:16-17, 6:19; Ephesians 2:19ff).
 - He does so because his destiny is perfect *Christiformity* (2 Corinthians 3:17-18; Galatians 4:19-20; Ephesians 4:11-16; Philippians 3:1-14).

*The Christian life of repentance, obedience and holiness is the life of **faith** – of believing what God says is true and living into that truth* (cf. Romans 14:23 with 1 Corinthians 5-6).

B. The Gospel and Community

The gospel defines the Christian and informs and impassions every aspect of his existence: *The gospel tells him **who** he is, **how** he is to be and **where** he is going.*

Discerning these things and living into them, however, depends upon the Christian’s relationship with Christ’s Church. The reason is that the Church is Christ’s *Body* and so His *fullness* (Ephesians 1:22-23); the Church of the New Testament isn’t a religious organization, but a singular spiritual organism of which every individual Christian is a member.

The individual Christian can no more discern his identity and fulfill his calling than a hand can when it has been severed from the body.

1. The Body Gives *Meaning* to Christian Identity and Function

The whole provides definition and coherence to any given individual member. As well, the functionality of the parts is determined and discerned in relation to the whole.

2. The Body Gives *Expression* to Christian Identity and Function

The Christian “fleshes out” and expresses his identity/function in the context of the body, and *he does so in connection with the mutual ministration of the Spirit’s gifts and graces.*

3. The Body Gives *Nourishment* for Christian Growth and Progress

The Spirit nurtures and perfects Christ’s life and likeness in each believer, *but He does so through the instrumentality of the Body*; the Body causes the growth of the Body.

- a. The Spirit uses the Body of Christ to bring illumination, instruction, exhortation and conviction to the saints (Matthew 7:1-5; Galatians 6:1-10; Ephesians 4:11-16; etc.).
- b. It is in the context of the life of the Body and its proper functioning that the Spirit works the ministration of spiritual gifts (Romans 12:1-13; 1 Corinthians 12-14).

C. The Gospel and Testimony

The Body of Christ gives meaning and expression to the Christian's identity and function: *The life of the new creation is the life of the new creational community* (1 Peter 2:4-10).

But it is precisely the life of this community – openly manifest in the world – that provides the marrow of God's witness to His work in His Son.

1. The Community of the Spirit vs. Natural Community

- a. The new creation isn't perceptible within the natural order; a person doesn't detect it from his observation of and interaction with this world (2 Peter 3:1-4). It must be perceived in the creaturely entities in which it is presently manifest. *Christ's saints are the beginning of the new creation, and so they must bear the testimony of it.*
- b. Though they are new creatures in Christ, Christians look the same and are still subject to the features and corruptions inherent in the old order. How, then, do they manifest the truth of Christ's new creation? How do they bear His fragrance in the context of their "naturalness"?
- c. The answer is the "unnatural" dynamics evident in the community of the Spirit.
 - The Church – properly defined and constituted – is the spiritual community defined by its members' personal union with Christ by His indwelling Spirit.
 - It is a community formed and united apart from any earthly or natural considerations or bases of commonality: *Christ's Church is the community whose sole determining and defining basis is "common union" with one another in Him.*
 - It is the community of the Spirit, possessing and manifesting the life and likeness of Christ and *ordered by love* (cf. Matthew 5:43-47; John 13:35; 1 Peter 2:4-10).

It is precisely because the Church is so often wrongly conceived, wrongly constituted and wrongly functioning that it fails to manifest the life of Christ – the reality of the new creation in Him – to the watching world.

2. The Community of the Spirit as a City on a Hill

The believing community bears true witness to the world only when it perceives, orders and executes its life with the mind of Christ in the power of the Spirit (Matthew 5:13-16).

- a. This witness as “salt” and “light” is passive rather than active – it is bearing Christ’s fragrance (2 Corinthians 2:15), but *it is the primary and most important aspect of the Church’s witness.*
- b. It is the ground and authentic substance of active, verbal witness:
 - One can have verbal witness to Christ without passive witness, but the absence of the latter destroys the former.
 - On the other hand, where passive witness exists it will always flow outward in active (verbal) witness (cf. Matthew 12:33-35; Luke 6:43-45).

3. The Community of the Spirit as Ambassador of Reconciliation

- a. The Church’s authentic existence testifies to the world of the new creation: *The world sees in its life and operation things that can’t be explained by the principles and paradigms of the old order they inhabit and live according to.*
- b. At the same time, the Church’s passive witness is insufficient: The unbelieving world detects the new creation in the Church’s life and operation, but *it is unable to explain and make coherent the things it perceives in the Church.*
- c. It is necessary that Christians bring content and coherence to what the world perceives. *As they live the gospel, so also they must proclaim and interpret the gospel.* And that gospel is not a call to renounce bad or sinful behavior in favor of an upright or religious life; it is a call to be reconciled to God (2 Corinthians 5:17-21).

IV. Conclusion – The Words of Life and the Call to Come Home

The message of the gospel is the proclamation that, in His Son, God has reconciled His creation to Himself, and now all people everywhere are righteously obligated to embrace and enter into that reconciliation. *To refuse to do so is to insist upon living in a reality – a “world” – that has been done away with in Christ and succeeded by the everlasting eschaton of the new creation.*

To refuse to embrace Christ and the life He holds out is to continue in a tragic and disastrous lie; it is to delude oneself that life – identity, purpose, meaning and fulfillment – is found in what is actually the realm of death. It is to miss the truth that a person finds his life only as he gains it in Christ; authentic life comes at the cost of losing what appears to be life (Matthew 16:24-26). There is no greater human tragedy than to cling with undying hope to what can never satisfy.

“Ho! Every one who thirsts, come to the waters; and you who have no money come, buy and eat. Come, buy wine and milk without money and without cost. Why do you spend money for what is not bread, and your wages for what does not satisfy? Listen carefully to Me, and eat what is good, and delight yourself in abundance. Incline your ear and come to Me. Listen, that you may live; and I will make an everlasting covenant with you, according to the faithful mercies shown to David.” (Isaiah 55:1-3)