

The Great Need of our Time

Christ's Formed in You

Selected Scriptures

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There is but one gospel, and many counterfeits. There is but one people of God, and many masquerading as the people of God. How are you to know which is of the Spirit and which is Satan's counterfeit? The simple answer is this: *That which produces the righteousness of Christ within the believer is of the Holy Spirit; this is the true gospel.* And that which produces an appearance of religion but denies personal righteousness, is what the Bible calls, the faith of demons (James 1:18-19). In this brief exhortation, you will hear that it is Christ's own righteousness being worked out in one's thinking, affections, and character that affirms a person belongs to Christ. And yet, this is seldom heard from our pulpits. What is popular today, at least in conservative circles, is to boast of the *imputation* of Christ's righteousness while dismissing *infused* righteousness. In the retail model of church, forgiveness of sins and the promise of heaven is an easy sell; but dying to self and conformity to Christ, not so easy. So, most focus on the easy. As G. K. Chesterton put it, "The Christian ideal has now been tried and found wanting; it has been found difficult and left untried."

Now, I realize my words may shock some of you. You may have been taught that it is one's view of justification by the imputed righteousness of Christ and not sanctification which determines whether one is a true Christian. After all, did not Luther say that justification by faith alone is the doctrine upon which the church stands or falls? You may have therefore become somewhat apathetic regarding inward righteousness. You may have even been taught that sanctification is *not* a necessary aspect for salvation: "Just get saved and leave sanctification for later." If that is the case with you, you have been deceived and your eternal soul is in great peril. The truth is, sanctification, as defined by ever-increasing conformity of life and conduct to Christ, is a necessary correlate to justification. A life devoid of Christlike character does not stand justified before God.

Now, as a sidebar, let me say: There are no good works the sinner can do that in any way contribute to his justification. The “Five Solas”¹ of the Reformation remain a beacon of light into the religious darkness of man-made religion. By this I mean that salvation is indeed by grace *alone*, through faith *alone* in the finished work of Christ *alone*, as revealed in Scripture *alone*, and to the glory of God *alone*. And yet, and please here me now, apart from the new life that follows being born again, all our formulas regarding justification ring hollow.

Steve Lawson is correct when he says justification is “Just paperwork in heaven — a change of status before God from condemned to justified. It does not change you.”² So as essential to salvation as justification is, it remains but one part of the gospel message. We must remember that ours is a trinitarian faith, and this means that for which the Father elected his people, he sent his Son to secure by his finished work, and all that Christ secured on our behalf must also be appropriated to the believer by the Spirit, else Christ has died in vain. It is the gift of the Spirit that evidences we are in Christ, and it is the indwelling Spirit who is ever at work to accomplish one primary purpose: Christ conformed in the believer.

The Purpose of the New Birth

Back to my main point. The great need of our day is Christ formed in the believer. And this is the work of the Spirit through the word of God, and in healthy Christian community. Let’s consider here the work of the Spirit. Most Christians profess to be *trinitarian* by creed, but many are functional *binitarians* in that they deny this work of the Spirit in them. It is necessary then to stress that the entirety of the Christian life is best defined as life in the Spirit: “If we live by the Spirit, let us also walk in the Spirit” (Galatians 5:25). And it is the clear testimony of Scripture that to walk in the Spirit is to walk in progressive Christlikeness.

For centuries, Protestant evangelists have rightly declared the new birth to be absolutely necessary: “You must be born again!” declared the great George Whitfield, and untold numbers since him. But too often we have failed to move from new birth to new life. One would think that the work of the Spirit ends in the new birth! But Jesus did not declare one must be born again in isolation but within the context of the kingdom of God (see John 3:3), that kingdom being what

¹ *Sola* is Latin for “Alone”

² Steven J. Lawson, “Which Doctrine is Most Lacking in Churches Today?” Available on YouTube.

D. A. Carson defines as: “God’s saving and transforming reign.”³ It is the transforming part we too often dismiss, and to our peril. This ought to be a deep concern for all professing Christians—indeed, an alarming, frightening, and sobering concern for we are speaking here of one’s eternal destiny!

Listen please

Redemption does not end at the new birth; rather, it is the entry point to new life in Christ. Salvation is not an invisible work of God; rather, genuine salvation will be evidenced in a lifestyle modeled after Jesus. These are the principles we must recover. In other words, to legitimately claim to be born again, that new birth must blossom forth into new life due to the indwelling Spirit of Christ. Indeed, “if anyone does not have the Spirit of Christ they do not belong to Christ” (Romans 8:9). How can one claim to have the Spirit of Christ and yet fail to grow in His likeness? Now note, I did not say we ought to expect perfection in Christlikeness, that will not happen in this lifetime; but we ought to pursue it as though it were possible, and not simply concede as many do these days, “Well, I am just a sinner saved by grace.”

That one is a sinner saved by grace is, of course, true enough, but we are saved with a purpose, and that purpose is to be conformed into the image of Christ. This then is how we ought to pray: “Lord, conform me into your image to the greatest degree possible in this lifetime.” But, alas, our churches are filled with people who believe they have been born again but are virtually devoid of Christlike character! *Something is terribly wrong*. Remaining simply a sinner saved by grace following conversion is a fallacious and unbiblical approach to the Christian life! Saying a simple prayer, and signing up for church duty does not save anyone.

And is there is any worse state than to believe one’s eternal destiny is secure when it is not? The chief evidence of the new birth is not tied to having once recited the “sinner’s prayer,” or to baptism, or church attendance, or reading the Bible, or one’s giving record, or ordination; these things are fine in themselves, but cannot be relied upon as evidence of the new birth. What I am about to prove to you is the only certain evidence one is born again is *ever-increasing conformity to Christ*, and if this is not present, there is no reason to believe one has in fact, been born again. Now let’s hear more from God’s word.

³ D. A. Carson, *Commentary on the Gospel of John*

God's Primary Purpose

It is God's primary purpose to conform every believer to the image of His dear Son, in thought, word, and character. To be born again means one has been infused with a new nature by the regenerating work of the Holy Spirit. It is this new nature then that develops into ever-increasing conformity to Christ. The apostle Paul writes,

²⁶ In the same way, the Spirit helps us in our weakness. We do not know what we ought to pray for, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us through wordless groans. ²⁷ And he who searches our hearts knows the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for God's people in accordance with the will of God.

²⁸ And we know that in all things God works for **the good** of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose. ²⁹ For those God foreknew he also predestined **to be conformed to the image of his Son**, that he might be the firstborn among many brothers and sisters. ³⁰ And those he predestined, he also called; those he called, he also justified; those he justified, he also glorified (Romans 8:26-30, emphasis mine).

This conformity to Christ is God's primary purpose in your life; it is the "good" for which God causes all things to work together. In the current environment, it may be hard to imagine that this is so, but that simply means you must change your way of thinking, you have to be as Paul later states, "transformed by the renewing of your mind" (Romans 12: 2). In his letter to the Corinthians, that same apostle refers to he and his associates as "ministers of the new covenant, not of the letter but of the Spirit; for the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life" (II Corinthians 3:6). This means Paul and the other apostles went about declaring that the promise that God would literally create a new people for his name's sake has been fulfilled! (Ezekiel 36:24-27; Jeremiah 31:31-34; Isaiah 42:6; Joel 2:28-29).

And what is the outcome of this new covenant? Paul continues, "Now the Lord is the Spirit; and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is liberty. But we all, with unveiled face, beholding as in a mirror the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from glory to glory, just as by the Spirit of the Lord" (II Corinthians 3:17-18). You know you are in the new covenant because you are being transformed into the Lord's image. God has from eternity decreed to create a people for his name who bear His glorious image, a decree that is fulfilled in the person and gospel of Jesus Christ *and* in all those united to Him by grace through faith (see Ephesians 1:3-6; 2:8-10). To the Colossians, Paul instructs that his readers, that having

put off the old man at conversion, they must now “put on the new man who is renewed in knowledge according to the image of Him who created him” (Colossians 3:10). The Christian life involves putting off the old self and putting on the new self. But not merely an act of moral improvement, but as a response to the work of the Spirit in us. A similar instruction is given in the letter to the Ephesians to, “put on the new man which was created according to God, in true righteousness and holiness” (Ephesians 4:24). Think of the glorious reality: That new creation which is yet to be fully realized in a new heaven and a new earth, has nonetheless been made manifest in that you are *now* a new creation, living evidence of that which is yet to come (II Corinthians 5:17-21).

The Apostle’s Agony

In his letter to the Galatians, Paul contends with new believers to hold to the gospel of grace in the face of Jewish false teachers touting salvation as a human achievement. These believers were in danger of denying the work of the Spirit and thus, as I said earlier, becoming functional binitarians! And to deny the work of the Spirit is to be severed from Christ and the Father. In chapter three of Galatians, the apostle therefore says the one thing he wants to know from his readers is whether they received the Spirit by the works of the Law or by hearing with faith (Galatians 3:1-6). The main point in Galatians is not how one is justified, as important as that is; rather, the central issue is whether salvation is by the work of the Spirit through hearing by faith *or* by the fleshly works of Jewish Law observances? (Galatians 3:1-6). This remains the question today: Do we received the Spirit by hearing with faith, or by religious ritual and observing seasons and practices?

Paul’s primary point is if they enter life by the Spirit they are to continue to live in the Spirit. The Spirit is a gift, the evidence that the eschatological salvation secured by Christ is now at work in you, in this present day. And the chief work of the Spirit in this present age is to form Christ in the believer so that they learn to live and love as Christ did. To put it succinctly: Christians are Spirit people. What was happening in Galatia was the promise of the new was being fulfilled in their midst. In this new covenant, God promised to place his Spirit within his people, “I will put My Spirit within you and cause you to walk in My statutes, and you will keep My judgments and do them” (Ezekiel 36:27). New Testament scholar Gordon Fee reminds “For Paul the elimination of Torah [the demands of the first five books of the Law] does not means the

end of righteousness. To the contrary, the Spirit produces the real thing, the righteousness of God himself, as his children reflect his likeness in their lives together and in the world.”⁴

Some might wonder why Paul was so emphatic on this point. It appears that his readers had been born again; they were now in Christ, so why sweat the details, Paul? Celebrate the successful evangelistic campaign and go on to the next mission field. Many modern missionaries and evangelists would do precisely that. But in chapter four we read: “My dear children, for whom I am again in the pains of childbirth **until Christ is formed in you**, how I wish I could be with you now and change my tone, because I am perplexed about you!” (Galatians 4:19-20 emphasis mine). How many Christian leaders do you know who so agonize? And why is this so very important that they do? It is important because one gospel produces only the works of the flesh, though covered by a thin veneer of Jewish legalism, whereas the true gospel produces the fruit of the Spirit, which is the result of Christ in them (5:16-26).

Therefore, Paul was not agonizing over whether they would respond to hearing the gospel, they had done that; rather, he was agonizing like a woman in birth pangs until Christ was formed in them. This conformity is the natural expectation for spiritual development following conversion. So Paul longed to present them to God as a spiritually mature people in whom the image of Christ was fully formed and therefore imaged to each other and into that region of the world. He puts it succinctly at 6:15: “For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision avails anything but a new creation.” It was the new creation that Paul wanted them to now grow into, but man-made religion was threatening to abort that process.

And that is always the case. All man-made religion can do is subvert the ways of God. An aberrant form of Christianity comes along and subverts the image of Christ in the believer while maintaining appearances that all is well. In his letter to the Colossians, Paul therefore reminds them, it is “Christ in you, the hope of glory!” and not so-called visions, religious ritual, or law-keeping (Colossians 1:27). My point here is to help you see that ever-increasing conformity to Christ is the normative Christian life for which we must all strive. It is how the divine accomplishment in Christ is worked out in our lives in the most practical of ways, namely, how we live and how we love.

⁴ Gordon D. Fee, “Galatians” *Pentecostal Commentary Series* (Blandford Forum, Dorset, UK: Deo Publishing, 2007), p. 225.

To Live and Love as Christ Did

The great question of our day is not whether Jesus “Gets us” as the popular media campaign suggests, but whether or not *we get Jesus*. It has been my experience and observation that most professing Christians believe in a Jesus of whom they have little intimate knowledge nor practical fellowship. One of the great benefits in our New Testament is the plurality of apostolic writings declaring the same message throughout. We do not therefore preach the gospel of Paul, or John, or Peter or Apollos, nor is it an evangelical gospel; rather, it is the gospel of Jesus Christ. And the essence of this gospel is the forgiveness of sins *and* new life that comes by grace through faith in Jesus Christ.

Many claim to possess forgiveness of sins today but display no new life. They may have curbed their natural appetites or worse yet, fallen prey to religious moralism, but that does not equate to the new life as set forth in the apostles. Jesus did not come in order to model moral improvement for this in Adam, but to crucify Adam and bring a new creation by His resurrection from the dead. Christianity is a death sentence for Adam, not a program of self-improvement.

Listen the apostle:

I [my old self, my ego-centric life] have been crucified with Christ; it is no longer I who live, but Christ in me; and the life which I now live in the flesh, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave Himself for me. I do not set aside the grace of God; for if righteousness comes through the law, then Christ died in vain” (Galatians 2:20-21).

Do you consider your old self crucified with Christ? Is your current life energized by Christ in you, or have you set aside the grace of God in favor of a religious self-improvement program you call Christian faith? How you answer this question carries eternal implications.

Listen to the words of the apostle, John: “Whoever claims to live in him must live as Jesus did” (I John 2:6, NIV). The goal of the Christian life is to live and love as Christ did. That’s the purpose for which the Spirit imparts the new birth. Nowhere is being born again presented as the chief aim; rather, it is the new life of Christ in you is the chief aim. Listen again to John:

Love has been perfected among us in this: that we may have boldness in the day of judgment; because as He is, so are we in this world. ¹⁸ There is no fear in love; but perfect love casts out fear, because fear involves torment. But he who fears has not been made perfect in love. ¹⁹ We love Him because He first loved us (I John 4:17-19).

We have confidence at judgment, says John, because “as He is, so are we in this world.” The NIV reads, “This is how love is made complete among us so that we will have confidence on

the day of judgment: In this world we are like Jesus.” In other words, we have boldness in the day of judgment because we participate in Christ’s nature, and so live and love as He did. Christ is our righteousness and sanctification and redemption, and this is both imputed to us *and* infused when we are born of the Spirit.

A Pastoral Call to Self-Examination

My concern in writing this is pastoral. I want you to know the power of the Spirit in producing the practical righteousness of Christ in your way of thinking and feeling and in your conduct. I want for you to live and love as Christ did, and experience the joy of genuine union with Him; as Peter puts it, “joy inexpressible and full of glory, receiving the end of your faith — the salvation of your souls” (I Peter 1:8-9). I want you to look to the day of judgment with boldness for you have experienced ever-increasing conformity to Christ.

I am also compelled by those same pastoral concerns to warn you that if you believe the imputation of Christ’s righteousness means you may live a life devoid of Christ’s imparted righteousness within you, you are deceived and you will not enter the kingdom of God. This is not my opinion; it is the clear testimony of the New Testament (Matthew 7:15-29; John 15:1-6; Acts 20:32; I Corinthians 6:8-11; II Corinthians 6:11-7:1; Galatians 5:19-21; Ephesians 5:5-14; Philippians 3:17-21; Colossians 3:1-11; I Thessalonians 4:1-8; II Thessalonians 3:6-15; I Timothy 4:1-11; 6:3-10; II Timothy 3:1-9; Titus 1:10-16; Hebrews 3:7-4:2; 5:12-14; 6:1-8; 10:26-39; James 4:7-10; I Peter 1:13-21; II Peter 1:5-11; I John 3:1-9; Jude v.5-11; Revelation 21:7-8).

Therefore, in light of the promise of Christ in you, and the warnings to those who merely feign Christian faith, I beg you to examine yourself to see whether you are in fact, in the faith. Preferably, this is best done with a spiritually mature, biblically informed person who can guide you in this examination. But it is better to do it alone and in prayer than to not do so at all. I beg you to consider carefully, prayerfully, and continually what I have said in this brief exhortation. May the love of God, the grace of the Lord Jesus, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you as you do. **AMEN.**

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