

Everything in Christ

I have often heard it said, especially among Christians who have had a “glorious” spiritual experience, “Who needs doctrine? If we have the Holy Spirit, sound doctrine is not important. If I have Jesus in my heart and am born-again, why confuse me with doctrine?” This is a very dangerous and damaging position. Anytime we speak about Jesus, the Holy Spirit, the human heart, and being born-again, we are referring to specific doctrinal definitions. Who is this Jesus in whom we believe? Some today refer to him as an “enlightened spiritual master,” others see him as a great moral example, while still others define him as one who discovered his “Christ-consciousness” as we are also capable of doing.

But on the other hand, it is very easy to become so engrossed in getting doctrinal definitions right that we divorce those definitions from the lives of people. While we may boast of our great theological definitions, what good are they if few in the pews understand them or believe them? A recent poll indicated that over half of the Lutheran people who occupy pew space on Sunday morning do not accept the doctrine of justification. Having correct doctrine demands effective teaching and proclamation. This apparent divorce of doctrine from life has caused many “spiritual” Christians to think of doctrine as irrelevant. As far as they are concerned, it has no practical value other than creating denominational barriers.

We must realize that doctrinal definitions determine the nature and quality of the life that exists within the Christian Church. For example, think of how deeply the Roman Catholic doctrine of the Lord's Supper has distorted the spiritual life of Catholic people. By claiming that the bread and wine in the Sacrament actually changes into the physical body and blood of Jesus, the people have been led to worship and adore a piece of bread. This is a doctrinal distortion. Think of the “Holiness Churches” and their doctrine of “perfect sanctification.” The guilt, condemnation, and judgement of other Christians that often exists among these people are the result of a false doctrine of the process of holiness.

There are many examples today of wrong doctrine and theology negatively influencing the lives of people. The “name, claim, prosperity teaching,” which has led many into false expectations is based upon a wrong theological definition of faith. The “Full Gospel” teaching which includes physical healing within the redeeming work of Jesus Christ leads those who remain in sickness to question their forgiveness and eternal life. In fact, one might even demonstrate that the moral failures of the big name evangelists in the past are the result of a theological distortion of sanctification. When Jimmy Swaggert tearfully said some years ago, “I don’t know what happened to me,” I responded by thinking, “If you had an accurate understanding of your sinful nature, you would not be in the dark.” Doctrinal definitions are not divorced from life but actually determine the nature and expression of the Christian life.

So, put on your “thinking cap” and let us discuss the very important biblical definitions and “doctrines” regarding the Good News of our Lord Jesus Christ.

The Gospel

The very essence of Christianity is about God. While the question for those who adhere to other religions is, “What are we to do?”, the question for Christians is “What has God done?”

Christianity is not about me. It is about God. The message of what God has done in Christ Jesus is called “the Gospel.”

While it is true that the Gospel is not about me, it does affect me. The message of the shed blood and perfect righteousness of Jesus Christ are not abstract concepts divorced from any practical application. The message of the Gospel is faith productive, and faith is no weak thing. It receives the benefits of the Cross of Jesus Christ, brings the Holy Spirit, delivers from death and the devil, and creates a new life. All of this is accomplished, not by virtue of the power of faith, but by virtue of what faith has grasped and clings to – the Lord Jesus Christ and the benefits of his atoning work.

It seems to me that there is much confusion in the thinking of people today over the issue of the relationship between the Gospel and living the Christian life. Some seem to be suggesting that the Gospel is about Jesus Christ while living the Christian life is about me. As a result, some are suggesting that preaching the Gospel is for unbelievers and the teaching of biblical principles for living are for believers. Others are willing to borrow theories and notions from psychology in order to produce the Christian life.

The truth is, everything is about Christ. Let’s think in these terms. . .

Identity and Life

The two themes of identity and life are central in the inspired teachings of St. Paul. He tells us that **in Christ**, we discover our identity. This is an objective truth and defines our position with God. We are righteous. We have been justified. We are forgiven of our sins and heaven-bound. The Christian life, on the other hand, is lived **through Christ** who dwells within us by the Holy Spirit. This produces subjective Christian experience and is defined as sanctification. Making this distinction in reading and understanding the epistles of Paul is very important. On some occasions, he is speaking about our identity, who we are in Christ Jesus. On other occasions, he is referring to our daily living, what results are produced through the new life of Christ dwelling within us.

We cannot confuse identity and life. If I try to apply my perfectly righteous identity in Christ to my human life, I will be filled with guilt and condemnation. If, on the other hand, my sinful human life becomes my identity before God, I will experience doubt over whether or not my sins are actually forgiven and that I am going to heaven. So, we must distinguish our identity in Christ from our life lived upon this earth. As we discover our identity by looking to Jesus in faith, so also we live the Christian life by also looking to Jesus. Our identity is defined as **Justification**. The life we live by looking to Jesus is defined as **Sanctification**.

While these two important doctrines can not be divided or separated, they must be distinguished. It is of great importance for us to realize that God has given to us one gift: HIS SON. In that one gift, God has given to us everything. There is a profound simplicity in Christianity. Everything begins and ends with the person of Jesus Christ. God does nothing in us directly! He has done everything in Christ Jesus! We have been included in Christ. This grants to us a new identity. Through the hearing of the Gospel, the Holy Spirit brought us to faith in Jesus. He now dwells in us. This grants to us a new life. Because **I am in Christ**, I have a new identity in the heavenly places. Because **Christ is in me**, I can live a new life. Jesus is the Alpha and Omega, the beginning and the end. In answer to all your questions, God has given to you Jesus! It is that simple.

The Inner Christ

Experiencing the joy, peace, hope and contentment that is a part of the Christian life is the spontaneous result of the life of Christ dwelling within us through the Holy Spirit. While our identity is in the heavenlies, the indwelling Christ is our life. Jesus promised in John 15 that if we abide in him (find our identity with him in the heavenlies) and he abides in us (stay connected to his life within us), together we will bring forth much fruit. In Colossians 1:27, the Apostle Paul speaks of the glorious mystery that has been revealed to the saints, which is "Christ in you, the hope of glory." Seeking to live the Christian life means that we find ourselves in Christ and seek an on going, life-effecting experience with the Christ who dwells in us.

The fact that Christ dwells in us is not the source of our identity nor is "the inner Christ" to be the object of our focus. A person might mistakenly declare, "Sure I am a sinner, but Christ dwells in me. Therefore, I must be O.K." Being right with God is based upon what God has done outside of us, in Christ. It is not based on the fact that Christ has chosen to dwell within us. The stance of the Christian is always extroverted. We are always looking away from ourselves, to the throne, where we are seated in the heavenly places.

Not Mysticism

In various segments of the Christian Church today, there is a dangerous, growing emphasis upon the alleged mystical encounter with the inner Christ. Mysticism seeks to discover the "Christ-self" within the depth of the human psyche, or as some suggest, within the unconscious mind. The revival of mysticism today is largely attributable to the influence of the popular philosophy of psychiatrist Dr. Carl Jung. A "Christian" mystic alters his state of consciousness by eliminating all thoughts from his mind and entertaining the images in his imagination. By producing a meditative state, the mystic believes that he is actually visualizing Christ and entering into a dialogue with him. Some mystics also engage in the practice of "journaling" the "words of Jesus" received in their mystical encounter. I realize that there are many committed Christians who love the Lord Jesus and out of a desire to draw closer to him, have embraced the practice of mysticism. The practice is deceptive and dangerous. It demands an introverted focus that is not taught in Scripture. While I accept a "mysticism of the Word" and believe that we actually encounter Christ in the Gospel as the Holy Spirit supernaturally enlightens our understanding, I cannot embrace a mysticism which directs my focus to myself, in order to look within myself.

It is very necessary to hold fast to the truth that faith always looks to the Christ who is outside of us, not the Christ within.

Martin Luther demanded in the very strictest terms that faith in no case ever looks to itself, but only to the Christ outside of us. Concerning this demand, Werner Elert states:

"Without this basic demand, every doctrine of the indwelling, no matter how it may look otherwise, would necessarily not only endanger but would actually destroy justification. The necessity for self-accusation, without which there is no justification, holds true of the whole natural and moral 'inwardness,' including what the mystics call the 'depth of the psyche'. . . Faith, however, clings constantly only to the other Person - the Person who I am not - to Christ."¹

This is a very important principle! The stance of the Christian toward himself must always be one of self-accusation. We are always related to the earthly man. We never escape from the Cross that continually delivers us to death. While the Law directs us to ourselves to discover our sin, the Gospel always calls us out of and away from ourselves so that, rejecting ourselves as

rejecting a "dead thing," we turn to the person of Christ Jesus. Anytime we become introspective, we should discover sin and death. When we look away from ourselves to Jesus, we discover righteousness and life. Mysticism is a very dangerous practice because it distorts the focus of the Christian.

Not Spirituality

Usually in any work you might read dealing with the Christian life, the subject of the spiritual side of the human personality becomes a part of the discussion. This can be very deceptive and misleading. I do not believe that we are capable of discerning, in and of itself, the pure distinction between what is spiritual and what is not spiritual. Such a distinction only becomes real when it is related to and determined by our concrete, objective, active pursuit of the person of Jesus Christ. The person of Jesus Christ **is our spirituality**. Rather than speaking of "becoming more spiritual," we should rather think in terms of growing in our daily faith relationship with our Lord Jesus. This is as spiritual as we can get.

At the time of the Reformation of 1517, Martin Luther properly avoided speaking of Christian growth in terms of a deepened or "intensified spirituality." German theologian Werner Elert explains:

“ . . . Nor does Luther's faith want to be an intensified "spirituality." In the claim to have this intensified "spirituality," he sees a recollection of the temptation "You will be like God" and at all events the beginning of the end of faith.”²

When we consider the "spirituality" of this age, Luther's position is certainly relevant, even if it was posited in the sixteenth century. As it was true in Luther's time, we also are living in a very "spiritual age." The New Age movement and the new mystical "transpersonal" psychology offers to people various spiritual pursuits such as meditation, visualization, contact with "spirit guides," out of body experiences and the like. There have been attempts to define spirituality in physical terms by claiming that the right side of the brain is the seat of spirituality. Others have used Sigmund Freud's obscure psychological concept of the "unconscious mind" to locate the seat of human spirituality. The time has come for Christians to stop talking about "spirituality" and concentrate more on talking about the person of Christ Jesus. I do not like to be identified or to identify others as being "deeply spiritual." Such a definition can mean many things. I would prefer to speak of a person as having a relationship with Jesus Christ. While you can have "spirituality" apart from Jesus, you cannot have Jesus without the Holy Spirit. Relating to the person of Jesus Christ from day to day is the extent of our spirituality.

Not Spiritual Things

Contrary to the thinking of many Christians, God does not grant to us a host of spiritual things, benefits and experiences. Our human pride would like to have spiritual benefits and experiences in order to enlarge ourselves and be identified as "deeply spiritual people." God does not offer to us forgiveness, righteousness, love, peace, joy, gifts, wealth and prosperity as separate entities. Since our identity is in the heavenly places, we can not claim anything that comes from God as belonging unto us. God has only given to us one thing: His Son Jesus Christ who is our life. In Christ are all of the blessings and benefits of life and salvation. The Bible says: "Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in the heavenly realms, with every spiritual blessing in Christ. (Ephesians 1:3) "It is because of Him that you are in Christ Jesus, who

has become for us wisdom from God - that is, our righteousness, holiness and redemption. (1 Corinthians 1:30) "...that they may know the mystery of God, namely Christ, in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge....So then, just as you received Christ Jesus as Lord, continue to live in him, rooted and built up in him...and you have been given fullness in Christ. (Colossians 2:2,3,6,7,10) "His divine power has given us everything we need for life and godliness through our knowledge of him who has called us by his own glory and goodness. (2 Peter 1:3)

In describing the sufficiency of the person of Jesus Christ, Martin Luther wrote:
"For in the person of Christ, there is everything, and without the Son, everything is lost. Therefore it is no small matter that without the Son, we should seek nothing and will find nothing either in heaven nor on earth, for then all is lost."³

It is very important for our understanding and experience of the Christian life that we recognize that all Christian benefits, gifts, and fruit are found in the person of Christ Jesus who dwells within us. They belong to Jesus, not to us. As a result of various movements and emphases within the Church, Christian consciousness often becomes directed at various spiritual pursuits. Some Christians go after inner, mystical experiences. Others attempt to discover their spiritual gifts or want to learn how to speak in tongues or to heal people. Many Christians today are pursuing prosperity or success as a characteristic by-product of being a Christian. Sanctification is desired as a reflection of individual personal holiness and morality. This separation of the content of the Christian life and experience from the person of Jesus Christ is no small matter! It will inevitably lead into numerous distortions such as humanism, mysticism, occultism, or legalism.

Our "religious" focus is not to be directed at "spiritual gifts and blessings" but at the person of Jesus Christ. If we desire the forgiveness of sins and a righteousness that is acceptable to God - God gives us Jesus. If we seek peace, joy, and love - God gives us Jesus. If we desire comfort in the midst of sorrow, hope when things look hopeless, assurance when plagued by doubt, and contentment through the changing scenes of life - God gives us Jesus. All spiritual gifts are simply manifestations of the new life of Christ dwelling with us, manifested spontaneously as we walk in the Spirit by directing our consciousness unto Jesus.

The theme of the letter of St. Paul to the Colossians is the centrality of Jesus Christ. The substance of the Christian faith, according to St. Paul, is found in the person and work of Christ. He warns the Colossians against seeking spiritual substance outside of Christ. He writes: "See to it that no one takes you captive through hollow and deceptive philosophy, which depends on human tradition and the basic principles of this world **rather than on Christ**. Therefore, do not let anyone judge you by what you eat or drink, or with regard to religious festival...These are a shadow of the things that were to come; **the reality, however, is found in Christ**. Do not let anyone who delights in false humility and the worship of angels disqualify you for the prize. Such a person goes into great detail about what he has seen, and his unspiritual mind puffs him up with idle notions. **He has lost connection with the Head**. (2:18)

When we were brought to faith Christ Jesus as our Lord and Savior, all of the benefits found in Him become our possession. We have His peace and joy, His righteousness and holiness. His love is shed abroad in our hearts through the Holy Spirit. In fact, the Bible tells us that in Christ we are complete and fulfilled. The Gospel of Jesus Christ is truly a message of Good News that calls us away from and out of ourselves to Jesus! We discover everything "in Christ," and will find nothing "outside of Christ.". "Christ is all and in all!"

In the Gospel according to St. John, our Lord Jesus speaks of himself as being the very essence of all the blessings and promises of God. "He is the Way, the Truth, and the Life." At Lazarus' tomb, Jesus did not speak of **resurrection** as being a reward for a life well-lived. He said, **I am the Resurrection.**" After feeding the 5000, he offered himself as being the very **Bread** that came down from heaven. He is the **Light** of the Word. He is the **Water** of Life. He is the **Good Shepherd**. " In Him was Life and the Life was the Light of men."

There are many today who are placing a renewed emphasis upon the Sacraments that God has graciously given to his people. They are Baptism and the Lord's Supper. These are means of grace or vehicles whereby God delivers to us the Lord Jesus Christ and all of the benefits that are found in him. For this reason, the Sacraments are vitally important to the life of the Church – God has chosen to deliver Christ to us through these means.

Yet, sometimes you get the impression that those promoting this "sacramental emphasis" are forgetting about the Christ who is being delivered through the Sacraments. They seem to be focusing upon the Sacraments as "spiritual things" that offer their own unique benefits in and of themselves. This is a major deception that is no different than Pentecostals focusing on speaking in tongues or Evangelicals focusing on the power of prayer. God does not give us "spiritual things," he gives us his Son Jesus Christ. Because I am baptized, I focus on Christ Jesus, not on Baptism. Because I gather around the Lord's Table, I focus on the Lord Jesus who has invited me to the table and comes to me through bread and wine, not on the elements of bread and wine.

"We Put on Christ!"

In Galatians 3:27, St. Paul writes: "All of you who were baptized have clothed yourself with Christ." When we were baptized into Christ Jesus, we put on Christ. We received all of the blessings that are in Christ. He became joined to us, so that whatever gifts, grace, peace, joy or contentment are manifested in us, they belong to Christ. They belong to us because we have Christ dwelling within us. Luther described this reality in his 1535 commentary on Galatians:

"Because He lives in me, whatever grace, righteousness, life, peace and salvation there is in me is all Christ's; nevertheless, it is mine as well by the cementing and attachment that are through faith, by which we become as one body in the Spirit."⁴

Because every Christian has Christ dwelling within through faith, it must therefore follow that every Christian possesses God's everything. While it is true that some Christians, as a result of personal deficiency and need, have seemingly appropriated more of the blessings that have been provided in Christ than have other Christians, they dare not declare or even remotely suggest, "I have something you don't have."

For example, a person who has passed through times of grief and turned in faith unto Jesus, discovered in Him the source of deep, abiding comfort. He is thereby enabled to declare, "Christ is my comfort!" One who possibly has not shared the same need might not have discovered the same provision in Christ. This does not mean that such provision is not already his possession, ready to be grasped by faith. For if we have Christ and have put on Christ, we have everything.

We are seeking Jesus! There is nothing that we will find outside of Christ, nor will we discover anything worthwhile inside of us apart from Christ. We seek all things "in Christ!" This is a very important understanding.

We don't say, "Christ has given me a new life" as if he has provided us with an identity here on this earth. Rather we say, "Christ is my new life."

We don't say, "I am becoming holier and holier" as if my earthly identity is in a state of improvement. We do say, "Christ is my righteousness and holiness."

We don't say, "God has given to me certain spiritual gifts," as if we are becoming somebody in this world. We do say, "In Christ are all the blessings of life and salvation."

We don't talk about the "great men of God" on this earth, for there are none. No matter how high and lofty a position a person attains in the Church of Jesus Christ or how much influence he is able to exert upon a large number of people, he remains a little, sinful man in whom is being manifested a great God and Savior, Jesus Christ!"

¹ ("Structure of Lutheranism", p. 167

², Structure of Lutheranism, p. 449.

³. "The Structure of Lutheranism, p. 66.

⁴ pp. 167