

REDEMPTION AND TRANSFORMATION:
A THEOLOGY OF NEW LIFE "IN CHRIST"

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Ideally, the gospel should change people. In reality, a gap exists between ideal behavior and what churches actually practice. Paul wrote to try to bridge the gap between the ideal and the real, and that bridge is the theological foundation for all ethical instruction.

The formation of Paul's theology is grounded in his conversion on the Damascus Road: the forgiveness of sins and new life "in Christ." The formation of the moral virtues of character is the consequence of being "in Christ."

The centrality of the cross, the resurrection, and especially Paul's conversion, are the foundational pillars in the formation of his theology. Paul was not a doctrinaire, except about the cross. The success of mission and our ability to exemplify the essence of hope to the world depends on us getting this right.

The Damascus Road Conversion (from Saul to Paul)
Acts 9:3-17: The Formation of Paul's Theology

In Paul's testimony, he singled out one fact from his former life: He persecuted the church. (Phil 3:6; Gal. 1-13; I Cor. 15:9). Why? What was Paul's rationale?¹

The announcement by Jesus' followers that that Jesus, an executed criminal, was the Messiah was inconceivable to Jews like Paul. Since the Jews believed that a criminal "hanged upon a tree" was cursed by God (Deut. 21:23), they abhorred the claim that the crucified Jesus was the resurrected Lord. For Paul, as a devout Pharisee and Jew, Jesus was simply a cursed criminal.

¹ I follow Luke Timothy Johnson very closely here.

Furthermore, Paul did not think of himself as a terrible sinner. He kept the law and treated the Torah—law of Moses, Prophets, and other OT writings—as the absolute norm for measuring human and divine righteousness. Paul persecuted the church because he was "jealous" for Torah. So Paul's conversion story is found in the context of his zealous persecution of Christians as a righteous Jew.

At this time, the most fundamental tenant of Judaism was "Yahweh is ONE GOD... the Lord our God is One Lord." This radical monotheism made the Christian confession that "JESUS IS LORD," a particularly odious heresy to Saul. Paul writes, "I was as to zeal, a persecutor of the Church." Since he desired to spread his reign of terror, he went to the High Priest and received the proper documents to go to Damascus and bring back any disciples—man, woman or child—for trial and execution.

Paul's meeting with the resurrected Lord changed everything. On the way to Damascus, he is knocked off his donkey to the ground . . . suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him.⁴

The crucial part of this text for understanding the formation of Paul's theology is found in Saul's inquiry for the identification of the heavenly source of his encounter.

Paul heard a voice saying to him, "Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me? Paul: "Who are you, Lord?" To his astonishment the answer came back, "I am Jesus who you are persecuting." The light went on in a flash. He reasoned, "If God raised Christ, then God could not have cursed him for his *own* sin, but for others'. Right standing before God must be based on justification through Jesus Christ.

Paul then connected his basic Jewish confession, the Lord God is One Lord, with his newfound confession, "Jesus is Lord," which for Paul, was the same as confessing "Jesus is *Yahweh*"!

After his Damascus Road experience, Paul was taken to Ananias' house and his sight was restored. The story of his conversion from Saul to Paul culminates with, "immediately he began to proclaim Jesus in the synagogues, saying, "He is the Son of God. . . and confounded the Jews who lived in Damascus by proving that Jesus was the Messiah, the Christ" (9:20-22).

Paul regarded the new age as having begun with the resurrection and Jesus not simply as the Jewish Messiah, but as a "new Adam," the start of a "new creation." The Gentile mission then was grounded in Jesus' resurrection as Lord of all humanity.

These are formative ideas in Paul's theology: Jesus is Lord/Jesus is the Christ. For Paul, Jesus is the Lord Jesus Christ.

Paul's Theology Illustrated: Images from Colossians 2:13-15

People are dead in sin and there is absolutely nothing they can do about it. They are as powerless as dead people to break the chains of condemnation! Paul, a wonderful preacher, seeks to find images that would show how completely God in His mercy through Christ destroyed, banished, and indeed wiped out the condemnation against us. He offers two of the great image pictures in the New Testament.

His first picture is an execution. In the ancient world, the indictment against a criminal was nailed to the tree on which he was crucified. Our sins are written out like an IOU—signed by the debtor admitting the sin. There is an indictment against us and we have admitted that the charge is true, in effect our own death warrant. But, God blots it out, wipes the slate clean as though it had never been. In his amazing grace, God erases the judgment and it no longer exists.

God then takes the indictment and sets it aside—double nullification—and He nails it to the cross of Christ. The practice in the ancient world was to nail the indictment against the victim to the cross. The indictment against Jesus was nailed to the cross above his head. Similarly, Paul reminds his readers that the indictment against us was itself crucified.

Paul's second picture of how Christ destroyed the condemnation against us was the triumphal parade of a Roman general on his return from battle. The victorious general marches through the city with his soldiers and behind them—the spoils of war—a wretched company of kings, leaders and people he has conquered.

Because of conversion, Jesus has stripped the powers and authorities, made them His captives and put them to shame. In Jesus' triumphant procession all the powers of evil are present for everyone to see, conquered forever. Paul's vivid picture is a vision of the total adequacy of Christ. Sin is forgiven; evil is conquered. Christ is sufficient. That is the plan that God had for us "before the foundation of this world."

Paul views conversion as the distinctive religious experience, a transformation experience foundational to the emphasis in his letters. He focuses on the risen Jesus and the importance of life "in Christ," which is illustrated by treasure in jars of clay (2 Cor. 4:2).

For Paul, theology was proclaiming what God had done for the believing community through the life, death and resurrection of the Lord Jesus Christ. This proclamation is what it means to have new life "in Christ."

Ephesians – New life “in Christ:” The Basis of Character Formation

For Paul, conversion, the consequence of Christ’s transforming power, meant to live “in Christ.” As a teacher of the early Christian communities, Paul’s “thought” was formed in response to real-life problems. He was a radical thinker, reconciling social opposites. The problems that Paul faced in the new communities, however, tended to involve cognitive dissonance – a situation created when reality does not agree with expectations.

Ideally, the gospel should change people so they could overcome differences between Jew and Gentile, male and female, slave and free. In reality, there was a disconnect between belief and behavior. If believers are part of a new creation (in Christ), why do the powers of the world still dominate? As mentioned earlier, Paul’s writing to bridge the gap between the ideal and the real provides us with the theological foundation for all ethical instruction.

Paul’s appeal was, “If you could only understand who you are in Christ.” Paul worked on the premise that for any who have experienced conversion, Christ’s strong transforming power through the resurrection results in living “in Christ.” For Paul, living “in Christ” meant to turn from darkness to light, from the power of Satan to power of God (principalities and powers), to receive forgiveness of sins as well as an inheritance. This is also what it meant to live in the community of faith.

When Paul, the prisoner, wrote the letter to the Ephesians at the end of his life, the battle for the “universality of the gospel” had been won. With time on his hands, Paul wrote some of the highest flights of theological thought in the New Testament – “from the foundations of the world . . . to the fullness of time.”

The central theme of Ephesians is what it means to be “in Christ.” God has a plan: the reconciliation of all things. The plan, established before the foundations of the world, sets the believer free from the things of this world.

Paul wrote some heavy theology in order to tell his readers about some very practical things. He wanted them to have unity in the church (ch. 4). Since they were “in Christ” they needed to behave themselves and stop acting like pagans. He taught them how to build Christian families (ch. 5). In order to have unity, behave themselves, and have a Christian home, they had to learn how to fight the devil (ch. 6).

But Paul's readers had a vision of God that was too small. If they were to be successful, they needed a greater vision of God in order to receive new insight regarding who they were in Christ Jesus and to understand the mystery of Christ. So Paul wrote the following:

Redemption in Christ (Ephesians 1:3-14)

- ³ Blessed *be* the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly *places in Christ*,
- ⁴ just as He [*elected*] us **in Him** before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and without blame before Him in love,
- ⁵ having predestined us to [*adoption*] as sons by Jesus Christ to Himself, according to the good pleasure of His will, ⁶ to the praise of the glory of His grace, by which He made us accepted **in the Beloved**.
- ⁷ **In Him** we have [*redemption*] through His blood, [*the forgiveness of sins*], according to the riches of His grace ⁸ which He made to abound toward us in all wisdom and prudence,
- ⁹ having made known to us the [*mystery of His will*], according to His good pleasure which He purposed **in Himself**, ¹⁰ that in the dispensation of the fullness of the times He might gather together in one all things **in Christ**, both which are in heaven and which are on earth—**in Him**.
- ¹¹ **In Him** also we have obtained an [*inheritance*], being predestined according to the purpose of Him who works all things according to the counsel of His will . . .
- ¹³ **In Him** you also trusted, after you heard the word of truth, [*the gospel of your salvation*];
- **in whom** also, having believed, you were [*sealed*] with [*the Holy Spirit of promise*], ¹⁴ who is the [*guarantee of our inheritance*] until the [*redemption*] of the purchased possession, to the praise of His glory. (emphasis mine)

Note the quality of Paul's prayer. He does not pray for their health and welfare. He prays that they would have a new insight, a new comprehension of who they are and what God has done for them through Christ. Look what God has done for you! Look at who you are!

A Prayer that they would understand the greatness
of their position in Christ
(Ephesians 1:16-19)

¹⁵Therefore I . . . ¹⁶keep asking
¹⁷that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give
to you the spirit of wisdom and revelation in the knowledge of Him,
¹⁸that the eyes of your understanding being enlightened;
that you may know what is the hope of His calling, what are the riches
of the glory of His inheritance in the saints,
¹⁹and what *is* the exceeding greatness of His power toward us who
believe, according to the working of His mighty power²⁰ which He
worked in Christ when He raised Him from the dead and seated *Him* at
His right hand in the heavenly *places*,²¹ far above all principality and
power and might and dominion, and every name that is named, not only
in this age but also in that which is to come.

You were dead, now by grace through faith you are alive
(Ephesians 2:2-10)

¹⁻²And you *He made alive*, who were dead in trespasses and sins, in
which you once walked according to the course of this world; . . . we
all once conducted ourselves in the lusts of our flesh, fulfilling the
desires of the flesh and of the mind, and were by nature children of
wrath, just as the others.

⁴But God, who is rich in mercy, because of His great love with which
He loved us, ⁵even when we were dead in trespasses, made us alive
together with Christ (by grace you have been saved), ⁶and raised *us* up
together, and made *us* sit together in the heavenly *places* in Christ
Jesus, ⁷that in the ages to come He might show the exceeding riches of
His grace in *His* kindness toward us in Christ Jesus.

⁸For by grace you have been saved through faith, and that not of
yourselves; *it is* the gift of God, ⁹not of works, lest anyone should
boast. ¹⁰For we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good
works, which God prepared beforehand that we should walk in them.

Brought Near by His Blood (Ephesians 2:11,13,19)

¹¹Therefore remember that you . . . were without Christ, being aliens
and strangers from the covenants of promise, having no hope and

without God in the world.¹³ But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ.

¹⁹Now, therefore, you are no longer strangers and foreigners, but fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God.

The Mystery Revealed (Ephesians 2:1-4,9)

¹⁻⁴For this reason I, Paul, the prisoner of Christ Jesus [pray that] you may understand . . . the mystery of Christ . . . the unsearchable riches of Christ,⁹ and to make all see what *is* the fellowship of the mystery, which from the beginning of the ages has been hidden in God who created all things through Jesus Christ . . .

Appreciation of the Mystery (Ephesians 2:14-19)

¹⁴For this reason I bow my knees to the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ . . . ¹⁶that He would grant you, according to the riches of His glory, to be strengthened with might through His Spirit in the inner man, ¹⁷that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith; that you, being rooted and grounded in love, ¹⁸may be able to comprehend with all the saints what *is* the width and length and depth and height— ¹⁹to know the love of Christ which passes knowledge; that you may be filled with all the fullness of God.

Romans: Paul Unpacks Some of the Great Doctrines of the Church

According to Paul, his readers needed to learn to think theologically and theology is working out what God has done for us through the events of the incarnation, life, death, resurrection, and exaltation of Jesus Christ. Conversion, as mentioned before, the consequence of Christ's transforming power, means to live "in Christ" and life "in Christ" has a fundamental ethical dimension.

Propitiation (Romans 3:24-25): "For all you believe are now justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, when God put forward as a propitiation for sin through his blood..."

Redemption: Along with Romans 3:24-25, Ephesians 1:7: "In him, we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of sins, according to the riches of his grace that he lavishes on us."

Reconciliation (Romans 5:10-11) “For if while we were enemies, we were reconciled to God through the death of his Son, much more surely, having been reconciled, will we be saved by his life. But more than that we even boast in God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have now received reconciliation.”

Justification (Romans 5:1) “Therefore, since we are justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ.”

“In Christ” there is propitiation, there is redemption, there is reconciliation, and there is justification. This list could go on: salvation, atonement, adoption and so forth. By tracking this formative level of Paul’s theology, an important insight may be gleaned. Paul’s theology focuses on who Jesus was as “the Christ.” Apart from a few historical references (Rom. 15:3; 1 Corinthians 11:23), Paul sees Jesus always as the Lord Jesus Christ, a theological figure. Paul focuses on the theological significance of Jesus’ life, on his person, on the Christ who revealed God.

The Formation of the Moral Virtues of Character: The Consequence of Being “in Christ.”

For Paul, theology is working out what God has done for us through the events of the incarnation, crucifixion and resurrection and the gospel reconstructs what daily life was to look like within the community of faith. Transformation required radical changes, changes with a fundamental ethical dimension. Paul admonished the Corinthian believers to avoid sexual activity outside of marriage because their bodies would be raised from the dead; it mattered what they did with them (1 Cor. 6:14). They had experienced transformation and they were to act like it by living holy lives.

Among the redeemed, in contrast to cultural norms, even the differences that distinguished one’s religion, race, gender, and socio-economic status were to be leveled, “There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free man, there is neither male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus” (Gal. 3:28). This was the reversal of the order of things.

The Theological Indicative/Moral Imperative Relationship
(Romans 6:6-11—see also Romans 13:11-14; Eph. 4:20-31; Col. 3:1-17)

Paul demands that believers make a choice between contrasting alternatives: e.g. flesh/spirit; law/grace; disobedience/obedience, etc. Note that the fact declared to be true in the theological indicative is not the same as the deed done in the moral imperative.

Theological Indicative:

- “Knowing this, that our old self was crucified with Him . . . (Rom. 6:6). A fact declared to be true
- “For he who has died is freed from sin” (6:7). A fact declared to be true.
- “Now if we have died with Christ, we believe that we shall also live with Him” (6:8). A fact declared to be true.

Moral Imperative:

“ . . . So consider (reckon) yourselves to be dead to sin, but alive to God in Christ Jesus” (6:11). An imperative “to Be” and “to Do.” But what dynamic in the moral psychology of believers translates the facts into a deed? The answer is *reckoning* “the old self dead and the new self alive” (Rom. 6: 6, 11). “Reckon yourself” emphasizes the will that transforms the fact into a deed. Paul’s understanding of reckoning is tied, no doubt, to the cultural practice of Roman capital punishment law that illuminates the text. In Rome, the criminal was *legally dead* at the hour of crucifixion. *The person was considered as dead, reckoned as dead, even though the final breath may not occur until hours or even days later.*²

Paul’s argument: When Jesus was crucified—you were crucified with Him. *That is a theological fact!* It may take time for the old man to expire—but he can already be reckoned as dead.

The identification with Christ is tied in Paul’s theology to the relationship between the “old self and the new self.” While the theme of the “old self” versus the “new self” concerns Romans 6:6-8, the key concepts of Paul’s argument are found in Romans 6:5-11. To be “in Christ” is a crucifixion of the old self and a resurrection of the new self who is “to walk in the newness of life” (6:4).

² J. Christian Weiss, *The Perfect Will of God*.

The Formation of Moral Character—Put On/Put Off

Crucifixion and resurrection are not merely historical events for Paul. Crucifixion and resurrection shape the moral psychology of those who are “in Christ.” Paul demands a choice be made between sharp alternatives: e.g. flesh/spirit; law/grace; disobedience/obedience, etc. (i.e. “put off” and “put on”?)

Romans 13:11-14

Put off	Put on
The works of darkness	The armor of light
Reveling Drunkenness Debauchery Licentiousness Quarreling Jealousy	The Lord Jesus Christ

Ephesians 4:20-32

Put off	Put on
Your old self in its lusts, corruptions and delusions	Your new self according to the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness
Falsehood (25) Sinful anger (26) Stealing (28) Evil talk (29)	Truthfulness (25) Self-control, honest work (28) Sharing with the needy (28) Edifying speech (29)

Note that here “put off” and “put on” are not tied to the contrasts of darkness and light but to the old self and the new self.

Put away	Be
Bitterness Wrath Anger Wrongdoing Slander Malice	Kind Tenderhearted Forgiving (32)

Colossians 3:1-17

Put off	Put on
<i>Put off the old self with its practices.</i>	<i>Put on The new self, which is being renewed in the image of the Creator. In that renewal there is no longer: Greek and Jew, Circumcised and Uncircumcised, Barbarian and Scythian, Slave and Free</i>
Fornication Impurity Passion Enmity Greed Anger Wrath Malice Slander Abusive language Lying	Compassion Kindness Humility Meekness Patience Forbearance (13) Forgiveness Love (14)

Note the contrast between practices of earthly nature and virtues of the new nature

Galatians 5:19-25

In the flesh (16)	In the Spirit (16)
Works of the Flesh (19-21) (Practices of the sinful nature) (Behaviors of conduct) Fornication Impurity Licentiousness Idolatry Sorcery Enmities Strife Jealousy Anger Quarrels Dissensions	Fruit of the Spirit (22-23) (Virtues of moral character) (Traits of character, dispositions of character--Identity!) Love Joy Peace Patience Kindness Generosity Faithfulness Gentleness Self-control

Factions Envy Drunkenness Carousing	
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The moral problems in Paul's churches laid open deep differences that threatened to destroy the unity of community. They needed moral discernment. Paul does not offer a set of moral guidelines, but rather he uses the events of the cross and resurrection to provide the theological framework for moral behavior. Moral transformation must take place before members can be part of God's final victory.

For Paul, the community was a living organism in which the health and life of each part of the body depends on the life and health of the whole organism (12:12-31).

The daily behavior of a disciple must be based on theology. Readers of the Ephesian letter, Paul reasons, can't live like they should unless Christ has transformed them, unless they recognize that one must become the kind of person from whom the demands of Jesus naturally flow.

For this reason, Paul prays for them"

"I bow my knees before the Father, from whom every family in heaven and on earth derives its name, that He would grant you, according to the riches of His glory, to be strengthened with power through His Spirit in the inner man, so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith; and that you, being rooted and grounded in love, may be able to comprehend with all the saints what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ which surpasses knowledge, that you may be filled up to all the fullness of God" (Eph. 3:14-19).

He also exhorts them: Christ, by his grace, has taken away death, given you a whole new life, you are a new creation. All this is a free gift of God. God has elected you, adopted you, redeemed you, and sealed you with the guarantee of his Holy Spirit. The same Spirit that raised Christ lives in you. So now live like it. Because of all Christ has done for you, live a life that is worthy! In the words of Paul, *"I implore you [I beg you] to walk in a manner worthy of the calling with which you have been called" (Eph. 4:1).*

**Conclusion - The Cross and the Resurrection
(Back to the Beginning)**

The Christian faith—following Jesus—is grounded in the fundamental witness of Paul’s prayer: the cross and the resurrection. The explanation for our salvation—of the mystery from unbelief to belief—lies beyond human explanation. But those of us who, by faith, do believe are then asked to exemplify in our lives and witness the theological virtues of faith, love, and hope in all we do.

To understand who we are in Christ is to enter into a life of discipleship, following the crucified and risen Christ. Such discipleship calls us to be the community of faith, to minister to those to whom Christ ministered, the poor, the outcasts, those on the margins of society.

As followers of Jesus Christ we are called to proclaim the good news that the Lord who was crucified has risen! To a world plagued by despair and criticism we are, by our actions, to exemplify the essence of hope – that suffering and despair are not the final judgments upon God’s creation.