

Christ, the Spirit, and the New Creation

In the book of Galatians, Christ, the Spirit, and the new creation are usually treated as incidental to other themes in this Epistle. It is difficult to find studies of Galatians that address their relationship and connection in detail. Christ, the Spirit, and the new creation are actually three great persons that together form the underlying thought of Paul in this letter. The connection between them is one central to God's New Testament economy and demonstrates that this economy serves as the hermeneutic to the book itself.¹

This approach to Galatians is "person-centered," as opposed to "procedure-centered." The procedure-centered approach owes its prominence among commentaries and studies on Galatians to the impact of the Reformation. This elevated an essentially procedural concern in God's economy, that is, how an individual obtains justification before God, to the forefront of consideration. Even though, more recently, certain scholars have argued that the reformers were reading their sixteenth-century concerns into the text, they have only been able to replace one procedural consideration with another, namely, the extent to which the law functions in Galatians as the procedure for the Gentiles to remain within the covenant of Abraham.²

A person-centered approach to Galatians, however, shifts the focus of consideration from the *how* of God's economy to the goal: *what*, or *who*, it is that He wants to obtain. Here we can identify a progression in the sections of this Epistle. Christ in the revelation of the apostle's gospel is the center of 1:1 to 2:21; the Spirit in the experience of the Galatians is the focus of 3:1 to 5:15; and the new creation governs the walk of the believers from 5:16 to 6:18. This is no accidental sequence. On the contrary, Paul is consciously moving his readers, in a succession from one great person to the next, towards the goal of God's economy: the new creation, which is the new man (Eph. 2:15), a corporate person composed of Christ, the Head, and the church, His Body, that will consummate in eternity as the New Jerusalem.

Christ

Even the most casual reader has no difficulty in identifying that Christ in Galatians is revealed as God's Son

(1:16; 2:20; 4:4). Unfortunately, centuries of traditional understanding of the term *Son of God*, molded by the christological debates of the early church, have numbed us to the significance of Christ being the Son of God and robbed us of the radical impact that such a revelation had on Saul of Tarsus. The emphasis of the creeds, which arose from these debates, is on the distinction between the three persons of the Triune God. This is understandable in the context of the early church's struggle against the heresies that denied the deity of the Son and the Spirit. But as a consequence in Christian thought, when any one of the three is mentioned, it is typically only in distinction from the other two that He is conceived.

However, quite the reverse is intended by Paul when he declares that it pleased God "to reveal His Son in me" (1:15-16). His thought here involves the entire Triune God, not just the second person. For the apostle, the Son is the image of the invisible God (Col. 1:15), God in visible expression, because in Him all the fullness, the full expression of God, was pleased to dwell (v. 19). Furthermore, through incarnation, the Godhead's fullness dwells in Christ in bodily form (2:9). God's power and wisdom are Christ Himself (1 Cor. 1:24; Col. 2:3). So for Paul, Christ is none other than the mystery of God, because He is the embodiment and expression of the complete God.³

In Galatians 1 Paul contrasts his pursuit in Judaism in former times with the drastic change that took place on the road to Damascus. The cause of this was the revelation of God's Son in him. Previously, he was a top Judaizer, surpassing many contemporaries in his race in zeal for the religion of his fathers, a religion founded on the God-given revelation to Moses. He worshipped the true and living God. What could cause this religion to become of no consequence to Paul? Only something wholly superior. He abandoned the Jewish religion with its law and traditions, counting them even as refuse (Phil. 3:8), because he saw God's Son as the embodiment and expression of God. He now knew that the man Jesus, whom he had considered a contemptuous Nazarene, was the incarnated God, crucified, resurrected, and ascended. In Judaism Paul had possessed God, but only objectively. Now he had God embodied in His Son. In Judaism the law was everything to him, because through it he had the

objective knowledge of God. Now through Christ's death and resurrection he had come to know this God through an inward revelation,⁴ which resulted in God indwelling Paul (Gal. 2:20). In Judaism the prophets were God's oracles. Now both the law and the prophets had given way to Christ, who both fulfilled the law and was in His person the speaking of God (Matt. 5:17; Heb. 1:1-2). In short, Paul came to see that Christ the Son is everything—the realization of God and the fulfillment of the law and the prophets. He is all-inclusive.

The revelation Paul received concerning the Son of God bears upon a question which has preoccupied students of Galatians: whether or not there existed a fundamental difference between the gospel Paul preached and the gospel preached by the apostles in Jerusalem. Such statements as 1:11-12, where Paul declares the divine authority of his message, and the apparent discrepancies between his practice of the message and Peter and James's in 2:11-12 have fuelled this debate.⁵ Paul leaves us in no doubt that the revelation he received settled once-for-all the question of the law.⁶ James, though, certainly tolerated and perhaps even appreciated the Jewish believers' observance of the law (Acts 21:20). Peter, it seems, was in agreement with Paul in word (10:28), but not resolute in action in the face of the influence of James (Gal. 2:12). Since the apostles at Jerusalem had also received the revelation of the Son of God (Matt. 16:16; 1 Cor. 15:7), why, we may ask, did they still reserve a place for the law? The answer lies in the extensiveness of their revelation of Christ. The extensiveness of the revelation Paul received surpassed all the apostles before him who had known Christ in the flesh. It is in this sense that his gospel was unique. Thus, he tells the Colossians that his ministry was a stewardship to "complete the word of God, the mystery which has been hidden from the ages" (1:25-26). His ministry was to complete the word of God by announcing Christ as the mystery of God and the church as the mystery of Christ (2:2; Eph. 3:3-4). This was the completeness of the revelation of Christ, and the completion of the divine revelation of the New Testament depends heavily upon the ministry of this apostle. Therefore, it was not the case that Paul received a gospel without law that was particular to the Gentiles. Rather, the extensive revelation of Christ, the Son of God, that came to him and that he proclaims in his Epistles, holds for all believers, Jewish and Gentile alike.

The Spirit

The Spirit is the person who connects the Christ in revelation in chapters one and two of Galatians with the new creation, the goal of God's economy, in chapters five and six. As to Christ, the Spirit is His realization; as to the new creation, the Spirit is the means of the believers' organic salvation into the full image of Christ for the full expression of God through His sonship.

In 3:1-2 Paul makes a decisive turn from Christ to the Spirit. What is most striking in this Epistle is the absence of any reference to the Spirit prior to this point, particularly as He has so major a role in the subsequent chapters. In Paul's other catholic Epistles, he introduces the Spirit much earlier (Rom. 1:4; 1 Cor. 2:4, 10; 2 Cor. 1:22; Eph. 1:13; Phil. 1:19; Col. 1:8; 1 Thes. 1:5). Places where we might, perhaps, expect Paul to mention the Spirit are Galatians 1:12 and 16, in relation to revelation (cf. Eph. 1:17), Galatians 2:2 in relation to the Lord's leading (cf. Acts 20:22-23), Galatians 2:9 concerning the fellowship with the other apostles (cf. Phil. 2:1), and Galatians 2:20 concerning the living of the indwelling Christ (cf. Phil. 1:19-21). Yet the apostle waits until Galatians 3:2 to bring in the Spirit. At this point he begins to appeal in his argument to the experience of the Galatians. Paul's preaching portrayed the crucified Christ to the Galatians, and they believed in Him (v. 1). Their faith resulted in their receiving the Spirit (v. 2). Witness Lee notes that this indicates two aspects of one reality—revelation and experience:

In the first two chapters of this Epistle there is Christ in the divine revelation as the focal point of God's economy, but in the last four chapters there is the Spirit in our experience for us to have the divine life (ch. 3), to be born of God (ch. 4), to live and walk by the regenerated life (ch. 5), and to take the divine purpose as our goal (ch. 6). Thus, we enjoy Christ continually as the all-inclusive life-giving Spirit (v. 5a). (Recovery Version, 3:2, note 2)

Therefore, in Galatians, in a practical way, we can identify Paul's christology that he states explicitly in other places, namely, that in resurrection Christ, the last Adam, "became a life-giving Spirit" (1 Cor. 15:45); that "the Lord is the Spirit" and we are being transformed into the image of Christ from "the Lord Spirit" (2 Cor. 3:17-18); and that the Spirit of the One who raised Jesus from the dead dwelling in the believer and Christ's being in him are one and the same indwelling (Rom. 8:9-11). In Galatians Paul says that Christ was revealed in him (1:16), lives in him (2:20) and is being formed in the believers (4:19). This subjective experience of Christ is synonymous with the Spirit, whom the believers receive (3:2), are begotten of (4:29), are perfected by (3:3), and from whom the virtues of Christ come forth in them (5:22-23).

The relationship between Christ and the Spirit can be confirmed by comparing Galatians 2:20 with 5:24. In 2:20 Paul says that he is crucified with Christ. There the "I" of Paul has been crucified; this is the crucifixion of the old man in Romans 6:6. In Galatians 5:24 those who are Christ's crucify the flesh with its passions and lusts. Their action is an aspect of their walk by the Spirit, just as in Romans 8:13, where the putting to death of the practices

of the body is by the Spirit. These are not two different crucifixions. What Christ has accomplished on the old man is realized in the believers' experience by the Spirit.

The Spirit's work in the believers is presented in Galatians 3 and 4. Paul's argumentation in these chapters is possibly the most complex of all his writings. The Spirit here is set in contrast to the flesh (3:3; 4:29) and is the blessing of the promise (3:1-14) that replaces the guardianship of the law (v. 15—4:7). In the middle of this argument he makes an intimate appeal to the Galatians (4:11-20). This section is parenthetical, as far as his argument is concerned, but it opens a window into his primary burden for the Galatians: "My children, with whom I travail again in birth until *Christ is formed in you*" (v. 19, emphasis added). Paul's concern in struggling for the truth of the gospel to remain with the Galatians was not only for their initial justification by God (2:16) or for their remaining in the reality of God's covenant with Abraham (3:28-29). It is for the full formation of Christ within them. This indicates arriving at a certain maturity as the sons of God through an on-going process of God's salvation after justification.

This process of maturity is implied in chapter four. In verses 5 and 6 Paul speaks about the sonship of God which we receive through Christ's redemption. Then in verse 7 he says that if we are sons, we are also heirs. However, the parallel passage in Romans that relates the receiving of the Spirit to sons and heirs distinguishes between those who are children by receiving the Spirit (8:16) and those who are sons and heirs, namely, those who are led by the Spirit and suffering with Christ (vv. 14, 17). In Romans the Spirit witnesses with the believer's spirit in the initial stage of salvation as he cries, "Abba, Father!" (v. 15). In Galatians the Spirit is in the believer's heart, crying, "Abba, Father!" (4:6). By comparing these two portions, we may identify the maturing process that takes place in a believer by the Spirit's spreading within him. This is Christ being formed in him, and Paul's prayer in Ephesians 3:16-17 is for just this cause, the strengthening of the believers "through His Spirit into the inner man," referring to the human spirit regenerated by God, "that Christ may make His home in your hearts." The consummation of the Spirit's maturing work within us will be the full sonship, the redemption of our body (Rom. 8:23), which is the hope of righteousness that the believers eagerly await, by the Spirit out of faith (Gal. 5:5).

The Spirit in Galatians makes Christ and His accomplishments real to the believers, since He is the realization of Christ. The Spirit we receive is no mere token of our justification in Christ, nor merely a grace from God in the fulfillment of His promise to Abraham. He is the realization of the Triune God embodied in Christ. When Christ as the gospel is announced and believed, the Spirit is received. Then He becomes a bountiful supply (3:5) to

carry out the full formation of Christ within us for our full conformity to the image of the firstborn Son of God (Rom. 8:29). Ultimately, by the Spirit, out of faith, we await the full sonship, the redemption of our body.

The New Creation

The third great person in Galatians is the new creation. Most commentators agree that the new creation in 6:15 refers to the new man in Ephesians 2:14-16.⁷ Certainly the same elements occur in both passages—the two peoples, circumcision and uncircumcision; the creation through the cross; the descriptive *new*, and the issue of peace. But in Galatians Paul uses the term *creation* rather than *man*, which he also uses in Ephesians 4:24 and Colossians 3:10. He is not indicating a wider sphere than humanity in Christ (Col. 1:23; Mark 16:15)⁸ but emphasizing that those who are in Christ are a new work of God, His masterpiece (Eph. 2:10). He sets this creation of God, by designating it *new*, in sharp relief to God's first work of creation, which by definition is now old.

The cross of Christ has both a negative and positive action in the creation of the new man. Both aspects are covered in Ephesians 2. In the crucifixion of the flesh of Christ, the middle wall of partition, the enmity, consisting of the law of the commandments in ordinances, was abolished, thus releasing formerly divided humanity for the positive work of creation (vv. 14-15). This is the making alive of humanity with Christ in verse 5 for them to be God's workmanship in Christ in verse 10. This process of making alive is a function of Christ's death which is fulfilled in His resurrection (1 Pet. 1:3) and refers to the release of the divine life from within Christ through His crucifixion. This aspect is clearly brought out in John's Gospel. In John 12:24 the Lord likens His death to that of a grain of wheat for its life-release and multiplication: "Unless the grain of wheat falls into the ground and dies, it abides alone; but if it dies, it bears much fruit." The life-releasing aspect of death is also symbolized by the second of the two fountains which flowed from the Lord's pierced side, blood for redemption and water for life-impartment (19:34). The divine life of Christ, released through His death on the cross, became the positive factor in the creation of the new man.

There is a great difference between the two creations of God. God's first creation was by His creative act to call things into

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being out of nothing (Heb. 11:3). It manifests His eternal power and divine characteristics (Rom. 1:20) but not His nature. The new creation, in contrast, is God's begetting by His divine life (John 1:12-13) of those of the first creation whom He has resurrected (1 Pet. 1:3). It thus possesses the divine life (1 John 5:11-12) and partakes of the divine nature (2 Pet. 1:4). The first creation through sin became susceptible to corruption and death and thus became old (Rom. 8:21). The new creation has the incorruptible life of God as its content; therefore, it is eternal (1 John 5:13) and incorruptible (1 Pet. 1:23).

The new creation is a great advance on the state of Adam prior to his fall. Although Adam was created in God's image (Gen. 1:26), he only possessed the human life, not the divine. God intended that Adam would receive the divine life by partaking of the tree of life (2:9, 16), which was actually Christ as the embodiment of the divine life (John 15:1; cf. 14:6). By the fall, Adam became contaminated by sin, and he with the whole of the creation became subject to corruption and death. God's work in Christ on the cross certainly reversed these negative consequences. But it did more than restore humanity to the state of Adam before the fall. By the release and multiplication of the divine life, God's original intention for Adam—to be united to God by partaking of His life and nature—was fulfilled.

Ultimately then, what distinguished God's new creation from His first is the factor of God Himself. The new creation is deified humanity. Christ's death and resurrection brought to humanity what His work of incarnation, death, and resurrection accomplished specifically in the person of Jesus: the mingling of God with a human being. The new creation is the addition of God to humanity through their partaking of the divine life and nature. Thus, they become the manifestation of God in the flesh (1 Tim. 3:15-16). We may now designate this humanity as *God*, because in life and nature they are the same as God without sharing in the Godhead. Witness Lee illustrates this profound truth of deification by reference to an illustration drawn from everyday life—making tea:

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We may liken this old creation to a glass of plain water and the new creation to a glass of tea. Tea is formed by the mingling of tea with water to make tea-water. The water in the glass of plain water may be pure. But the fact remains that there is no element of tea in this

water. This illustrates the fact that even if the old creation were pure, it still would not have the element of God. Only when God's element is added to His creation and mingled with it does that creation become the new creation. Because God, the heavenly "tea," has been added to us, we are no longer the plain water of the old creation, but the "tea-water" of the new creation. In a sense, we have been "tea-ified." Using another expression, we may say that we have been "God-ified." God has been added to us to mingle with us and to saturate us and thereby to make us a God-man. God's desire is not simply to have a good man or even a pure man—His intention is to have a God-man. (*Galatians 3:7*)

Just as the water only becomes tea by participation through union and mingling with the tea, so it is for the new creation becoming God.

This interpretation of the new creation is supported by the context in which Paul employs the expression in Galatians. The key phrase is *as many as walk by this rule* in 6:16. The rule here "is apparently the principle just laid down about the 'new creation': the reference then is to members of the new humanity who are guided by this principle" (Bruce 273). To walk by this rule is to walk by the rule of the new creation, and this walk corresponds to the walk by the Spirit in 5:25.⁹ From this we may conclude that the entire section on the practical walk of the believers, from 5:16 to 6:10, describes what Paul intends by the walk by the rule of the new creation.

In this section the word *Spirit* is not always used in reference to the divine person of the Spirit. At least once Paul uses the term in reference to the human spirit when charging the brothers to restore in a spirit of meekness (6:1). There is a certain ambiguity as to the referent in the other occurrences of the word due to the absence of the article in Greek. Translators supply the definite article in English because in Galatians the Spirit is in contrast to the flesh; hence, the walk by the Spirit is in contrast to the walk by the flesh. But in Romans 8 the case for supplying the article in the phrase *walk according to the Spirit* is much weaker, and the translators of the NRSV consistently footnote the word with *spirit*, referring to the human faculty.¹⁰ Furthermore, in Galatians 6:18 Paul makes an emphatic reference to the human spirit as the location of the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, a grace brought by the Spirit (Heb. 10:29). Since the human spirit is born of the Spirit (John 3:6), those who worship God the Spirit are called to do so in the human spirit (4:24), and the Spirit witnesses with the human spirit (Rom. 8:16), what is involved here in Galatians is both the divine person of the Spirit and the human spirit, in fact, a mingling of both, because "he who is joined to the Lord is one spirit" (1 Cor. 6:17).

Without the term *Spirit* also implying the human spirit

and indicating the mingling of the two, it is not possible to harmonize the walk by the Spirit with the walk by (the rule of) the new creation. The former is a divine entity; the latter is a human one. But a walk by the mingled spirit perfectly corresponds to Paul's thought in the new creation explored above, that of the mingling of divinity and humanity. It further makes the walk by the new creation very practical. In order to have such a walk, we must exercise our human spirit in many ways: by prayer (Eph. 6:18), by setting the mind on the spirit (Rom. 8:6), by speaking in faith (2 Cor. 4:13), by loving the Lord (1 Cor. 2:9-11), by declaring that Jesus is Lord (12:3), by allowing the word to operate in our hearts (Heb. 4:12), by crying "Abba, Father!" (Rom. 8:15-16), by exulting in God (Luke 1:47), by speaking to each other in psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs (Eph. 5:18-19), by exercising to have a good conscience (Acts 24:16; cf. Rom. 9:1), and by being renewed in the spirit of our mind (Eph. 4:22-23).

Conclusion

Christ in Galatians chapters one and two, the Spirit in chapters three and four, and the new creation in chapters five and six disclose the full scope of God's eternal economy. Christ is the embodiment of God (1:16), who was incarnated to become flesh (4:4). Through death He accomplished redemption (3:1; 4:5), and in resurrection He became the life-giving Spirit (1:1; 4:6), as the consummation of the Triune God, to regenerate the sons of God and constitute them the members of His Body, the new creation (vv. 29, 6; 6:15). Through His organic salvation He transforms them (4:6), conforming them to the image of Christ (v. 19). They cooperate in this organic salvation by walking according to the mingled spirit (5:16; 6:1), by which they apply the cross subjectively to their flesh in order to live Christ (5:25; 2:20), expressing the divine attributes, signified by the law of Christ (6:2), in human virtues, which are the fruit of the Spirit (5:22-23). As they grow in the divine life as sons of God, they await the hope of righteousness (5:5), which will complete their organic salvation by the redemption of their bodies, and usher in the kingdom age for the realization of the New Jerusalem in eternity (4:26).

The three persons here are three aspects of one God in the carrying out of His plan. Christ is God embodied, the Spirit is God consummated and realized by humanity through faith, and the new creation is God enlarged and expressed by regenerated and transformed humanity.

by Jim Batten

Notes

¹This article may be considered a development of Witness Lee's thesis, briefly stated in footnote 2 to Galatians 5:16 in the Recovery Version of the New Testament.

²This is the so-called "new synthesis" in J. D. G. Dunn's "The Theology of Galatians: The Issue of Covenantal Nomism" in *Pauline Theology: Thessalonians, Philipppians, Galatians, Philemon*. Vol. 1. Augsburg: Fortress, 1994, pp. 125-146, which relies heavily on the work of E. P. Sanders in *Paul, the Law, and the Jewish People*. Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1983. For a useful discussion of both the history of the exegesis of Galatians and recent exegetical concerns, see Moisés Silva's *Interpreting Galatians: Explorations in Exegetical Method*. Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2001, pp. 15-49, 159-167.

³Here we may allude to the Gospel of John, where the Son is the Word of God (1:1), the declaration of the Father (1:18), and the complete expression of the Father (14:8-9). Moreover, in 1 John, possession of the Father comes by confessing the Son (2:23).

⁴In Galatians 1:16 Paul uses the preposition *in*, speaking of God's revelation of the Son. Note the contrast with *to* in Matthew 16:17.

⁵F. C. Bauer in 1831 famously proposed that a fundamental conflict existed between the apostles in Jerusalem and Paul. Eventually his thesis became known as the "Tübingen school." J. B. Lightfoot provided what is, for many, an effective rebuttal in *Saint Paul's Epistle to the Galatians*. London: Macmillan, 1884, pp. 292-374. This debate is summarized on pages 113 through 127 in Silva's *Interpreting Galatians*.

⁶Concerning Paul's actions in Acts 16:3; 18:18, and 21:26, these must be considered failures on Paul's part to live according to the revelation he had received and conveyed in his writings. See the footnotes to these verses in the Recovery Version of the New Testament.

⁷See, for example, pages 385 and 386 of *The New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology*, edited by Colin Brown and printed by Zondervan in 1986. Also see page 485 in *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, edited by G. Kittel and G. Friedrich and printed by Eerdmans in 1985.

⁸F. F. Bruce notes that this may be from a Hebrew idiom (273).

⁹Both verses use the word στοιχέω, a "walk according to rules."

¹⁰For a discussion of this related to another English translation, see J. N. Darby's New Translation, page xxiii.

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