
In Christ

I was listening to a podcast a few days ago, and I finally understood something that I had been puzzling over for decades. It turns out that I was making very complex something that is really fairly simple. The words, “in Christ,” have puzzled me. What does it mean to be “in Christ”? The word, ‘in,’ indicates location, but what does it mean to be located in Jesus Christ?

The speaker in the podcast simplified it. He said this: think about your location. You are in a room or you are in a car or you are in hockey arena. While you remain who you are, where you are located affects everything about your life. In the last few weeks, I spent over 90 hours in the driver’s seat of my vehicle, and being in that seat affected how I lived. I did not act as if I were seated in a front row seat at a hockey game. In that driver’s seat, I had to pay attention to the road, other vehicles, and to traffic signs. If I lost my concentration for even a few seconds, I would put myself and others in danger. In addition, I also had to move the proper levers and push the right pedals so that the vehicle would move forward. If I neglected to behave appropriately, my vehicle would never have left the driveway and my 90+ hours would have been entirely wasted. But if I was in my seat at a hockey game and acted in the same way, I would probably be encouraged to visit a mental health professional.

This is a rather obvious explanation, but it took the simplicity of the explanation to understand what it means that we are “in Christ.” True, this phrase does not speak of location, but it does speak of our situation and our response to it. According to Paul in Ephesians (and a number of other letters), we are “in Christ.” We have been brought into Christ by God’s grace and divine election and by the faith which the Spirit engendered in us so that we could believe. Entering “into Christ” involves God’s work and necessitates our response. By God’s grace, we are “in Christ.”

That does affect our lives in very real ways. Because I wanted to attend my daughter’s wedding, I had to enter into the driver’s seat of my vehicle. Sitting in a seat in the hockey arena would not have served the same purpose. Being in Christ, likewise, brings us to a new state of being. Through Jesus’ death on the cross, we enter into a renewed relationship with our Creator God. The relationship that was broken because of sin is restored, and it only when we become “in Christ” that what was broken is made whole. Being in relationship with God means that we can rely on him to provide for us both now and for eternity. We know that God the Father will never let us go because “in Christ” we have become his children. Being in Christ brings us to a new place.

But being in Christ also means that we are expected to behave appropriately. If I were sitting in the driver’s seat of my vehicle and acted as if I were at the hockey arena, nothing would get done, first of all, and second, I would look very foolish. In the same way, being in Christ means that we act appropriately. We expect that of ourselves and others when it comes to what room we are in, but we also expect that of ourselves and others when we are in Christ. We commit our lives to serving Jesus, being in him, being fully committed to following him wherever he may lead.

Finally understanding what “in Christ” means (I realize I was overthinking the phrase), I also can more fully understand what Scripture means when it says, “we are in this world but not of it.” It is true that while we are in this world, we are first in Christ. We will always be in Christ, but we will not always be in the world, for one day, when we pass from this life to the next, we will no longer be in the world. Thus, because the world is temporary, it should have minimal influence on both our identity and on our life choices and priorities. Being in Christ means that while we are in the world, we are not of the world, and we will always be in him.

We will always struggle with how this should look, and there is never one easy and straightforward answer. Perhaps the best advice comes to us from the prophets who told the Israelites that after they were taken into exile that they should build homes, find jobs and seek the wellbeing of the place where they lived. They did not cease to be God’s people, and Daniel illustrated that best of all when he refused to pray to the emperor and was punished by being thrown to the lions. He survived, entirely by God’s grace, and he went on to bless the Babylonian empire with wisdom given to him by God. He was in Babylon, and he had responsibilities there, but he never abandoned the fact that he was first and foremost “in Christ,” meaning that he was committed to the Lord and his ways.

We are in the Nobleford area, in Alberta, in Canada, in the West, and being here does impact our lives. But we are first and foremost in Christ and that affects how we live, our decisions, and our priorities. We shape our lives in ways that are appropriate for being in Christ even as we live in this world. It is Christ who takes priority, even as we seek to be a blessing in this world.

I learned something important from that podcast. Maybe you already knew what it means to be in Christ, but I needed the concept to be clarified. Now I know, and I must ask myself, “Am I living in Christ, or am I living in this world? Which has priority?” I suspect that as I think about this, being in Christ should demand a little more of my attention while the world around me should demand a little less.

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