

*Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, a new creation, the old things passed away, behold, the new things have come (2 Cor. 5:17)*

In 2 Corinthians 5:17, the apostle Paul uses the succinct phrase, “in Christ”, to define the status of a Christian. Paul claims that anyone who is “in Christ” has transitioned from the old life to the new life. Our experiences, however, prove that every Christian still possesses the vestiges of the old life. Therefore, there seems to be a contradiction between Paul’s statement and the experiences of Christians.

Here is how Walter Kaiser describes this seeming contradiction: “We affirm that life in Christ produces a new kind of living and are embarrassed to find so little difference between our actual living and the lives of those who make such claims. We rejoice in the forgiveness of God for our sinfulness and then recognize how our living often fails to convey this reality to others. We worship the Christ who gave his life for others, yet devote so much time and energy to promoting ourselves. We proclaim allegiance to Christ as Lord while living by priorities and values which indicate that there are indeed ‘many gods and lords’ by which we really live.”

How then are we to understand the tension between this joyful affirmation that “the old has gone and the new has come’ and our actual experiences in life? There are two main ways by which Christians have tried to deal with this problem. First, some try to answer this question by saying that since the flesh is weak, what we need to do is to concentrate on the spiritual side, on the soul. And since, through Christ, our souls have been redeemed, it really does not matter what we do with our bodies.

The second way by which Christians sought to deal with this problem is to make the ‘flesh’ and all its passions and desires submissive to the spirit. In the early Church, the extreme form of this response was rigorous reclusive isolation from the entanglements of the world.

What then does Paul mean by the statement that the person who is in Christ is a “new creation?” Note that Paul does say that we ought to strive to be a new creation. Neither does he say that we are to maintain our status as a new creation. What Paul is declaring in 2 Corinthians 5:17 is that “in Christ” means that believers are united with Christ in His death, burial, resurrection, ascension. In contrast, the old creation is a description of life dominated by sin and death; the old condition of alienation from God and its bondage to sin. It is what Paul describes in Romans 5 as being in Adam. It is the condition into which every person is conceived (Psa. 51:5).

But for Believers, as Kaiser has put it, “God’s redeeming love in Christ has reclaimed us for relationship with our Creator. In this relationship we are free from the bondage to sin which characterized us while we were alienated from God. But this new relationship does not automatically remove us from the influence of sin’s reality which surrounds us in all arenas of life. To be a ‘new creation’ is not to be perfect or faultless or insulated from the tough experience of life. Rather, to be a ‘new creation’ is to live life turned toward the God whose grace has reclaimed us in Christ.”