



ONE FOREVER

THE TRANSFORMING POWER
OF BEING **IN CHRIST**

RORY
SHINER

Guidebooks for Life



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INTRODUCTION

THE WORDS WE USE TO DESCRIBE being a Christian are revealing.

I grew up in a Christian context where the dominant language was that of being *saved*. Others talk about making a *decision for Christ*. Sometimes the language is of *following* Christ. Most of us, somewhat prosaically, just speak of being *Christians* or *believers*.

In this book, I want to think about how the Bible, and especially the apostle Paul, describes being a Christian. Now, of course, all the descriptors above are true and biblical—we are *saved* by Christ (Eph 2:5), we *decide for* Christ (Col 2:6), we are called *Christians* (1 Pet 4:16), and we are *followers* of Jesus (1 Cor 11:1).

However, there is a phrase for our relationship with Christ that is everywhere in Paul's letters and almost nowhere in our churches. It is a phrase that towers over the rest in frequency, and it gives birth to some of the most vivid imagery of the New Testament. Yet we hardly every use it.



Overwhelmingly, when the Bible wants to describe being a Christian, it says that we are *in Christ*.

The purpose of this book is to present the doctrine of being *in Christ* to people who, like me, are ordinary believers and who, also like me, have struggled to know what to do with this idea that theologians call ‘union with Christ’.¹

Why don't we talk like that?

Most of us (in my circles, at least) don't talk about being in Christ or united to Christ. Why is that?

Well, to be fair, it's just a hard idea to get your head around. I mean, what does it mean exactly to be *in Christ*, or for that matter, *in anyone*? If someone tells me I *follow* Christ, I get that. If someone says I am *under* Christ? Yep, I know what that means. *Saved by* Christ? Got it. *Inspired by*? Check. *Taught by*? Bingo. *In submission to*? I hear ya.

These are all concepts I understand and ideas for which I have ready analogies: Christ as a leader, a lord, a saviour, an inspiration, a teacher, a ruler. But to be *in Christ* almost seems to portray Christ as, well, a place, a

1 I want to thank Richard Chin and the Australian Fellowship of Evangelical Students for the invitation to first explore this topic in a series of talks at their National Training Event in Canberra in 2011.



sphere, a location—somewhere you can be. How does *that* work?

The concept of being ‘in Christ’ or ‘united to Christ’ was so new and so radical that Paul started inventing his own words to describe it. Before Paul, no-one had ever heard of being *co-crucified*, *co-buried*, *co-circumcised* or *co-raised* (Romans 6). Now in Christ, that is what has happened to all Christians.

The apostle John presents us with similar mind-bending ideas: that Christ is in the Father and we are in him and he is in us (John 14:20); and that in the incarnation, divinity and humanity—the creature and the Creator—should themselves become united in one person (John 1:14).

There may also be historical or temperamental reasons for not paying too much attention to the idea of being united to Christ. The very idea may strike many as too mystical, too subjective, too other-worldly. Or, tragically, it is just judged as too useless. If it’s true that we are in Christ, what exactly are we supposed to do with that? What practical purpose does it serve?

In this book, I want us to follow some of the thinking of John, and especially Paul, regarding the believer’s union with Christ. As we do so, we will discover that this doctrine—far from being impossible to grasp, subjective and impractical—is actually graspable, substantial, and, above all, deeply liveable.



Chapter 1

GLORY BE TO GOD FOR DAPPLED THINGS

Creation

Pied beauty

Glory be to God for dappled things—
For skies of couple-colour as a brindled cow;
For rose-moles all in stipple upon trout that swim;
Fresh-firecoal chestnut-falls; finches' wings;
Landscape plotted and pieced—fold, fallow, and plough;
And all trades, their gear and tackle and trim.
All things counter, original, spare, strange;
Whatever is fickle, freckled (who knows how?)
With swift, slow; sweet, sour; adazzle, dim;
He fathers-forth whose beauty is past change:
Praise him.

Gerard Manley Hopkins (1844-89)



Creation

Some filmmakers begin small and pan outward. The close-up of Bonasera's face as he makes his request in the dark, wood-paneled office of Vito Corleone is how Francis Ford Coppola chooses to begin his epic and sprawling tale of the rise and fall of the Corleone family in *The Godfather*.

Others choose to begin on a larger canvas before moving in toward their subject. Just think of the countless films about the lives of New Yorkers that begin with sweeping shots of the great city before focusing in on their subjects. Woody Allen's *Manhattan* comes to mind (or most Woody Allen films, for that matter).

The Bible is of the second type. It begins big: "In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth" (Gen 1:1). And so I propose that before we narrow in on our topic of union with Christ, we start big—with the union of all things.

In the Genesis story, the six days of creation are not simply about God taking his time to do what is admittedly a big task—namely, creating the universe. Rather, they record a more intricate process of *creation*, *distinction* and *blessing*.

On the first day, God *creates* light. He then *distinguishes* light from darkness, then he *blesses* the distinction, calling it "good" (Gen 1:3-5). We see the same pattern with the sky and the sea (day two), and the sea and the land (day three): he *creates*, he *distinguishes*, and he *blesses* (Gen 1:6-13).



The places marked out in the first three days are the places God goes on to populate in the second three days. He fills the earth with animals, the seas with sea creatures, and the sky with birds (Gen 1:14-26).

Notice what's happened? The formless and empty world of Genesis 1:2—something that had unity of uniformity—becomes, under God's hand, a diverse unity. It is made good by each part being made different. Over the six days, it becomes a world where things aren't so much *like* each other as they are *for* each other. Like a wonderful machine, a complex ecosystem or a human body, the parts all fit each other.

This difference is the glory of creation. Fish are at their best when they are at their fishiest. Trees do their best work when they are most tree-like. All things glorify God by being most properly the things that they are: "It is no shame to a dog that it does not shine, or to a star that it does not bark".²

And the spaces God creates are the contexts for freedom. The sky is not the prison to which birds are banished, but the best place for their flourishing. An unhappy fish, making a sudden bid for freedom from the constrictions of the ocean and escaping to the land, will soon discover that the ocean was not its straitjacket, but its liberty.

2 NT Wright, *The Resurrection of the Son of God*, SPCK, London, 2004, p. 346.



Unity in diversity

At the apex of creation, on day six, God creates humanity: one entity in two forms as man and woman (Gen 1:27). Remember how God says, “Let *us* make man in our image” (Gen 1:26)? Who’s the ‘us’ there? Is God talking to the angels? Is it a royal plural? Could be. But I don’t think it’s too much to see here a reference to what Christians call the Trinity: the unity and diversity of God himself—Father, Son and Spirit. The unity of humanity itself is, like creation, a unity in diversity. But maybe it is something that traces back to the very being of God himself, the one whose image they bear.

In Genesis 2, the wide-angle lens is replaced with a close-up. We are taken from the heavens into a garden, to the place where the man is to fulfil his role as God’s image-bearer. The man is tasked with ruling over it in a way that brings it to its fullest expression.

In this context, God looks and makes an observation thousands have made since: when men are left alone to do a job, generally, it is “not good” (the last time I tried to change the tyre on our car being a case in point). The problem, at least in the first place, is not *loneliness*, but *aloneness*. It’s not that he *feels* lonely, but that he *is* alone. And being alone—without diversity, without complement—is not a good way to bear God’s image.

The problem is not sheer manpower. God is not worried about the heavy lifting that Adam will have to do. He does not just need another pair of hands or a ‘second him’, but someone other than him; someone



who is like him, but distinct from him. Someone who, as we say in management speak, brings something else to the table.

And so God again embarks on a process of distinction. Having created Adam, he divides him. He takes the man and puts him into a deep sleep, and out of one of his ribs forms the woman. God the creator becomes God the surgeon, forming the woman out of the stuff of the man, who is now complete. And then God the surgeon finally becomes God the father of the bride. He takes the creature he has formed, the woman, and, like a proud father on the day of his daughter's wedding, presents her to the man (Gen 2:22).

In this scene, the first recorded words on human lips in the Bible are a love poem in praise of a woman:

“This at last is bone of my bones
and flesh of my flesh;
she shall be called Woman,
because she was taken out of Man.” (Gen 2:23)

It is the poetry of recognition. He looks at her and says, “This one corresponds to me. She is one of my kind; bone of my bone and flesh of my flesh.” But she is not just another version of him. They are not exactly the same as each other. They fit each other and complement each other.

And so in this moment, as Plato's Greek myth puts it, he finds his 'other half'. As Lana Del Ray says, he realizes that the world was meant for two. As Tom Cruise says to Renée Zellweger in *Jerry Maguire*, she completes him.



What's the point? In verse 24, the writer takes us aside and explains that this is the reason a man leaves his father and his mother and is united to his wife. That is, he leaves those who are *like* him—his family—to be united to one who is *unlike* him—a woman from a different family and different gender. Solidarity makes way for attraction, as attraction moves a man from those who are like him to the one to whom he is attracted by her difference. Why does this strange thing happen? As Genesis 2 explains, marriage is not just a union; it is a *reunion*. It is not just a coming together, but also a coming *back* together of a unity (Adam) who became a diversity (Adam and Eve), and who enter now into a greater unity (one flesh).

Ephesians 5

Still feeling like we are a long way from our topic of union with Christ? We are closer than you might think. In the New Testament, in Ephesians 5, Paul says that Genesis 2 is ultimately about our union with Christ. The union of Adam and Eve is really a pointer to the union of Christ and his bride, the church: “This mystery is profound, and I am saying that it refers to Christ and the church” (Eph 5:32).

We have started at the beginning, not just because it is by all accounts a very good place to start, but because from here we can see that from its very opening words,



the storyline of the Bible points to a goal of union with Christ. And it points to a particular kind of union: not a unity of sameness, in which all things are conspiring and drawing together to become one thing, but a unity of complement, in which we and Christ (and ultimately all things, according to Ephesians 1:10) are being drawn together through the Messiah to a unity in diversity, a union in which each corresponds to the other. In our union with Christ by faith, we encounter (as Eve did in the garden, to take the bride's perspective) someone who is unlike us, but who, in being unlike us, corresponds to us in a way that someone who was exactly the same as us could never correspond. We discover that Christ is not us, nor is he a 'second us', but rather he is the completion of us. When we meet Christ by faith, it is not just a union. It is a reunion.



When the New Testament describes what it means to be a Christian, it uses a phrase that is everywhere in Paul's letters but almost nowhere in our churches. Overwhelmingly, when the Bible wants to describe being a Christian, it says that we are *in Christ*.

But what does it mean to be in Christ? And how does this important biblical idea help us understand what God has done for us through Jesus, and what it means to be a Christian?

This short book by Rory Shiner sparkles with clarity, wit and biblical wisdom on this vital and much-neglected topic.

About the author



Rory Shiner has studied English, anthropology and theology, and is now an associate pastor at St Matthew's Shenton Park. He and his wife, Susan, enjoy the challenges of raising their four boys.

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