

A Passion for Christ

For through the law I died to the law, so that I might live to God. I have been crucified with Christ;²⁰ and it is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me. (Galatians 2:19-20).

Coming after Paul's description of his stand against the demand for Gentile submission to the Jewish law and his strong disagreement with Peter (Gal. 2:1-15), this statement sets out the relationship between law living and faith living. 'I died to the law': 'I live by faith'.

What is easily recognised is Paul's stress on the fact that it is what Christ has done and continues to do which is significant. So far, so good. What, perhaps, tends to be forgotten is the amazing context of the whole subject. By that I am not referring to the theological or literary contexts; I am referring to the fact that here is a situation where a man whom we know as Paul says that when 'Christ' died he died and that now 'Christ' lives in him.

What makes that context 'amazing' is that 'Christ', another way of saying 'the Jewish Messiah', is the designation of a *man*. If, as some argue, the letter to the Galatians was written as early as the late forties, or even as late as the mid-fifties of the first century,¹ then we have this declaration at the most about twenty five years after the death of Jesus. I suggest that something quite extraordinary is being said when Paul asserts that 'Christ lives in' him.

Paul knew that Jesus was a human being. He told the Romans that Jesus Christ was God's 'Son ... descended from David according to the flesh' (Rom. 1:3), he refers to stories in the Gospels as actual events, as in the account of 'the Lord's supper' (1 Cor. 11:20, 23-26) and he certainly knew that Jesus had been crucified and raised on the third day. What is more, he knew that 'there is one God; there is also one mediator between God and humankind, Christ Jesus, himself human' (1 Tim 2:5).² And yet within the whole of the New Testament, outside of the four Gospels, there is very little attention given to the 'stories of Jesus'. The words of the old hymn, 'Tell me the stories of Jesus, I love to hear'³ are not really reflected in the documents of the New Testament which explicitly describe (Acts) or are addressed to (the letters and Revelation) a post-Pentecost situation.

We might well argue that, given the existence of the four Gospels (actually there were *many* more than four) and the common knowledge of the events, at least in Judea and Galilee, there was very little need for recounting the stories of Jesus.⁴ But, in contrast to the way the actions and words of Jesus are used to *prove* points today, particularly when dealing with ethical matters, we could ask why Paul and the others did not do the same.

¹ For a recent evaluation, see Paul Barnett, 'Galatians and Earliest Christianity', *Reformed Theological Review* Vol. 59 No. 3, p. 114ff. For the point of this discussion, however, a difference of five or six years is of no consequence.

² See S. Kim, 'Jesus, Sayings of' in Gerald F. Hawthorne and Ralph P. Martin (eds), *Dictionary of Paul and His Letters*, InterVarsity Press, Downers Grove, 1993, pp. 474-492.

³ A hymn written for children by William Henry Parker in 1885.

⁴ Kim ('Jesus, Sayings of', p. 486) quotes Martin Hengel: 'It was simply impossible in the antiquities to proclaim a man crucified a few years ago, as Kyrios, Son of God and Redeemer, without saying something about who this man was, what he taught and did, and why he died'. See also James D. G. Dunn, *The Theology of Paul the Apostle*, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, 1998, p. 187.

It was not that Paul was indifferent to Jesus. His statement in 1 Corinthians 16:22 should be evidence enough of that: ‘Let anyone be accursed who has no love for the Lord. Our Lord, come!’⁵ Peter put it that ‘without having seen [Jesus Christ] you love him’ (1 Pet. 1:8). Paul often described himself and others as ‘servants of Jesus Christ’ (Rom. 1:1; 2 Cor. 4:1; Gal. 1:10; Phil. 1:10 etc). In 2 Corinthians 11:23 he asks, ‘Are they servants of Christ?...I am a better one’ and proceeds to catalog the sufferings he has experienced for the sake of this service. But there is no virtue in suffering. Paul had already made that plain.

If I speak in the tongues of mortals and of angels, but do not have love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. ²And if I have prophetic powers, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing. ³If I give away all my possessions, and if I hand over my body so that I may boast, but do not have love, I gain nothing. (1 Cor. 13:1-3)

So there can be no doubt of Paul’s attitude towards Jesus. So why is that ‘Paul tells us next to nothing about the life and ministry of Jesus apart from its climactic finale’?⁶

Who was Jesus?⁷

Why should anyone ‘love’ Jesus? Why should they worship him? And why should anyone long for his appearing (2 Tim. 4:8)? Sometimes today there is the attitude towards Jesus within the Christian community which seems to go as far as treating his name as a talisman to ward off evil or as almost a *mantra* which leads to a heightened expectation in worship. Then there is the unthinking, yet still Christian, attitude which accepts that Jesus is important, but which is largely uncertain exactly why. He just is. But why ‘love’ him? Who was he? And the next question, why tell anyone about him?

Jesus was a Jew. He was ‘born of a woman (i.e. a human being), born under the law’ (Gal. 4:4). Furthermore, he was a human being with a mission to other Jews: he was ‘born under the law, in order to redeem those who were under the law’ (Gal. 4:4-5). Whatever else, the immediate focus was the Israel of his own day.⁸ Those under the law (i.e. of Moses) were in need of redemption. He had come to ‘save his people from their sins’ (Matt. 1:21).

But in his preaching, Jesus made little mention of that bondage. His primary reference was to the kingdom of God. This pointed to Israel of the Old Testament, the people through whom blessing was to be restored to the nations (Gen. 12:1-3). However, the nations themselves, the Gentiles, do not figure greatly in the story. Instead, he told the twelve disciples, ‘Go nowhere among the Gentiles, and enter no town of the Samaritans, but go rather to the lost sheep of the house of Israel (Matt. 10:5-6). P.T. Forsyth put it:

⁵ The phrase ‘the love of Christ’ in 2 Cor. 5:14 is ambiguous, meaning either Paul’s love for Christ or Christ’s love for Paul.

⁶ Dunn, *Paul*, p. 184.

⁷ Those who want to find the answer to this question had better be prepared for a very big task. The amount of secondary material is enormous and much of it contradictory. See Ben Witherington III, *The Jesus Quest: The Third Quest for the Jew of Nazareth*, InterVarsity Press, Downers Grove, 1997 for a summary of the various approaches. A recent historical treatment of Jesus is Paul Barnett’s, *Jesus and the Rise of Early Christianity*, InterVarsity Press, Downers Grove, 1999.

⁸ Some of what follows is prompted by P.T. Forsyth, *The Preaching of Jesus and the Gospel of Christ*, N.C.P.I., Blackwood, 1997. This contains material originally published in 1915 and thus predating much of the discussion which has occupied twentieth century scholarship.

Insofar as He was preacher and teacher, insofar as the influence of His historic personality went, He was a prophet to Israel alone.⁹

This will certainly affect the way we use the Gospels. For instance, many regard 'the Sermon on the Mount', Matthew 5-7, as a manual for Christian living.¹⁰ Now to a certain extent that may be correct, but that was not its intention. Jesus was addressing Israel and the way that nation lived and, in doing so, was exposing the way that Israel and its leaders had reduced the demands of the kingdom to a minimum. As a result the purpose of God was being contradicted.

Here was a people intended to be 'the salt of the earth' (Matt. 5:13) but who had become quite tasteless. They were intended to be 'the light of the world' (Matt. 5:14) but having received the amazing revelation of God had chosen to hide the light. So Jesus made it plain that he was there precisely to fulfil the law and the prophets (i.e. the Old Testament scriptures), something which the scribes and Pharisees were not doing (Matt. 5:17-20). Jesus then proceeded to expose the minimalist approach to the law of Moses taken by the Jewish teachers and to show the full demands of God (Matt. 5:21-48).

The rest of the 'Sermon' deals with false piety and its corrective, genuine living under the generous care of God (Matt. 6), a true evaluation of others and of God's good giving (Matt. 7:1-11). Matthew 7:12, the so-called 'Golden Rule', 'In everything do to others as you would have them do to you; for this is the law and the prophets', is in fact a common saying in many religions, and was also attributed to Rabbi Hillel. It points again to the way Jesus is focussing on true law keeping.

In contrast were those who made the way to true kingdom living 'easy'. Those who followed them would find that the coming judgment would bring their destruction (Matt. 7:13-27). Matthew concludes by observing that in all this teaching Jesus was clearly different from the scribes (Matt. 7:28-29). Of course, Jesus' miracles of healing and exorcism were as much teaching as were his words (Mark. 1:21-27) and as such they and his other actions as well as his spoken teaching brought him into continual conflict with the authorities. As a prophet to Israel he failed. Israel did not rise up to the command to repent (Matt. 3:2; 4:17).

But Israel did rise up, and they had Jesus the prophet to Israel silenced. It was inevitable that they would.

Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you build the tombs of the prophets and decorate the graves of the righteous,³⁰ and you say, 'If we had lived in the days of our ancestors, we would not have taken part with them in shedding the blood of the prophets.'

³¹Thus you testify against yourselves that you are descendants of those who murdered the prophets. ³²Fill up, then, the measure of your ancestors. ³³You snakes, you brood of vipers! How can you escape being sentenced to hell?

³⁴Therefore I send you prophets, sages, and scribes, some of whom you will kill and crucify, and some you will flog in your synagogues and pursue from town to town, ³⁵so that upon you may come all the righteous blood shed on earth, from the blood of righteous Abel to the blood of Zechariah son of Barachiah, whom you murdered between the sanctuary and the altar. ³⁶Truly I tell you, all this will come upon this generation.

⁹ *Preaching of Jesus*, p. 5.

¹⁰ Martyn Lloyd-Jones (*Studies in the Sermon on the Mount*, Volume One, Inter-Varsity Press, 1959) put it: 'we are not told in the Sermon on the Mount, "Live like this and you will become Christian"; rather we are told, "Because you are Christian live like this." This is how Christians ought to live; this is how Christians are meant to live' (p. 17). Whatever value the Sermon may have for Christians, if it was really preached by Jesus then it could not have been for Christians. There were none. It was preached for and to his disciples.

³⁷Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it! How often have I desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing! ³⁸See, your house is left to you, desolate. (Matthew 23:29-38).

Whatever else he was, Jesus was not a source of wise sayings, or a unique miracle worker. Most of his sayings appear elsewhere, in particular they are anticipated in the Old Testament, and the working of miracles was known far beyond Israel. He was a prophet and by being a prophet, or *the* prophet, he was actually provoking fruitless Israel to kill him (Matt. 21:33-46).

To all appearances, Jesus had failed. The two on the road to Emmaus represented the sense of grief of many;

He asked them, ‘What things?’ They replied, ‘The things about Jesus of Nazareth, who was a prophet mighty in deed and word before God and all the people, ²⁰and how our chief priests and leaders handed him over to be condemned to death and crucified him. ²¹But we had hoped that he was the one to redeem Israel. Yes, and besides all this, it is now the third day since these things took place. (Luke 24:19-21).

Who would love a failed prophet, a dead Messiah who had failed to redeem?

A Revelation of Jesus Christ

Sometimes we might think that a person ‘converts’, that is, they decide to change codes, they choose to become Christians. The testimony of the scriptures is that such choices are not the result of independent thinking on our part but of the overwhelming action of God. Lamentations, a book which ponders the judgment that came on Israel though the Babylonians, closes with this prayer:

Restore us to yourself, O LORD, that we may be restored; renew our days as of old — ²²unless you have utterly rejected us, and are angry with us beyond measure. (Lam. 5:21-22).

The AV has ‘Turn thou us unto thee... and we shall be turned’. Unless God turns us, changes us, there can be no change. Even Jesus told the disciples, ‘You did not choose me but I chose you (John 15:16), and ‘No one can come to me unless drawn by the Father who sent me’ (John 6:44). It is impossible even to see the Kingdom, of which Jesus spoke, without a great, and to us incomprehensible, work of the Holy Spirit (John 3:3, 5).

What I am saying is that that is the very thing that has happened to us. And time after time, that is how the scriptures describe it. In his own case, Paul wrote,

For I want you to know, brothers and sisters, that the gospel that was proclaimed by me is not of human origin; ¹²for I did not receive it from a human source, nor was I taught it, but I received it through a revelation of Jesus Christ. (Gal. 1:11-12)

No one would say that Paul was not educated, nor that he had not discussed the matter of Christ with others. He was educated under one of the leading rabbis (Acts 22:3) and early on he did spend fifteen days with Peter (Gal. 1:18) and also later on spent time discussing what he had been preaching with others (Gal. 2:2). But his claim was that he understood what Jesus Christ had done because Jesus Christ himself had shown him.

Three times in Acts the story of Paul’s conversion, not his ‘converting’ but his ‘being converted’, is told (Acts 9, 22 & 26). He told it to Timothy (1 Tim. 1:12-16 and Gal. 1:13-16). On each telling, Paul was the, initially, unwilling object of God’s action.

Paul's understanding of Jesus as the Messiah, came as the result of his meeting Jesus. The man who had been crucified had met him on the road to Damascus, just as he had also met the others in the upper room, and so on. The only difference is that when Paul met Jesus it was after Jesus' ascension.

Paul could now see that 'it was [Jesus'] failure as prophet that extorted His resources as Redeemer. The Kingdom, His great theme, could only be established in His Cross.'¹¹ Jesus' death had actually been the way that redemption from sin had been accomplished. Israel could not have 'converted' and so could never, of itself, have fulfilled its role to the nations. So his prophetic role had provoked Israel to such depths of sin that his final goal was accomplished.

But the only way anyone could know that would be if the final goal came to them. The revelation of Jesus Christ actually gave Paul his gospel. Having met Jesus, Paul was confronted with all that Jesus had done. It was impossible to meet him and not, at the same time, to encounter the total forgiveness of sin, the gift of the Holy Spirit, adoption, faith, repentance and so on. Jesus did not offer Paul anything. He gave it all.

What I am suggesting, then, is that Paul's *explanation* of Jesus Christ and all that he had done was informed by many sources. He was highly educated and well read. But his *knowledge* of Jesus Christ and all that he had done was the result of a revelation of Jesus Christ.¹² Furthermore, in seeing the risen and ascended Jesus, Paul was now seeing himself clearly. For instance, he had told Timothy that he 'had acted ignorantly in unbelief' (1 Tim. 1:13). He was saying that when he was so violently opposed to the Christians he really didn't have a clue what he was talking about. But now, it's all different.

And what of his guilt before God, the sin from which he needed to be saved? That was now simply explained.

...the grace of our Lord overflowed for me with the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus.
¹⁵The saying is sure and worthy of full acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners — of whom I am the foremost. ¹⁶But for that very reason I received mercy, so that in me, as the foremost, Jesus Christ might display the utmost patience, making me an example to those who would come to believe in him for eternal life. (1 Tim 1:14-16).

How could this have happened, meaning, what had taken place that removed the deep guilt of the man? It was not that Jesus had loved him so much because he could see the potential in the man, if only he could be given the chance to develop it, so that the passed was just 'forgotten. Nor was it just that 'God had a plan for his life', although that was certainly true. These are ploys used to appeal to the egos of audiences. On the contrary, Paul was first and foremost a man under judgment. There was a record that stood against him with its legal demands (Col. 2:14); sin had killed him (Rom. 7:11). He was not a man who had some blemishes on his character, he was a man with deep guilt on his conscience and with the offence against the holiness of God to be reckoned with. Even as a believer, he understood the dark nature of sin in his life (Rom. 7:21-24).

So what did he see when he saw Jesus? The words of Galatians 2:19-20 must surely tell us something of it.

¹¹ Forsyth, *The Preaching of Jesus*, p. 5.

¹² It is possible that the phrase 'of Jesus Christ' could mean either 'by Jesus Christ' or 'concerning Jesus Christ'. In the long run both are true, though the likelihood of ambiguous statements being deliberate seems to me to be slight. In 2 Corinthians 1:13 he insisted that 'we write to you nothing other than what you can read and understand'.

(i) 'I through the law, died to the law that I might live to God. I have been crucified with Christ'. It was the law of Moses which took Christ to the cross. In dying, Jesus was not merely the victim of rebellious Israel, although that accusation is valid. But it is that, in dying, Jesus was rebellious Israel, indeed he was rebellious humanity. All the rebellion, the hatred of God, the evil expressed throughout history and that which had not been expressed, was all laid on him. Indeed he became that. He who knew no sin became sin for us' (2 Cor. 5:21). And the law of God did what it must; it judged him and in judging him it judged us all. 'I through the law died to the law.' Paul could see that when Christ was crucified *he* was crucified.

(ii) 'That I might live to God ... it is no longer I who lives but Christ who lives in me.' That must mean that Paul has come through the judgment. He is alive, he is free (Gal. 5:1). The risen Jesus is all there is. Either Paul lives in his participation in the death and resurrection of Jesus or he does not live at all.

(iii) 'The life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God who loved me and gave himself for me.' Faith means no less than utter dependence. It is not some mental assent to a set of doctrines. It means hanging on to Christ at all costs, because Christ loved him and gave himself for him. Faith was the response to love. This response was no debt to be repaid, it was a recognition that without Jesus Christ there is nothing, and there never can be anything. That love had come to Paul. and the love of Christ urged him on (2 Cor. 5:14).

You Love Him

The full statement in 2 Corinthians 5:14 is important.

For the love of Christ urges us on, because we are convinced that one has died for all; therefore all have died.

Someone might say, 'I am not Paul and that all happened then, but no one has seen Jesus today'. Leaving aside the matter of the many documented visions of Jesus, especially those in such places as Nepal,¹³ it is true that the New Testament claim is that Jesus cannot be seen. We are waiting for his appearing (see 2 Tim. 4:8; Heb. 9:28 etc), we walk by faith not by sight (2 Cor. 5:7) and we hope for what we do not see (Rom. 8:25).

What is not true is that because we cannot see Jesus we are in some way worse off. Jesus said to Thomas,

Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe. (John 20:29)

Any sense of deprivation is dispelled. What is more, there were many in what we call the early church who had also not seen Jesus, but the Galatians were told that 'It was before your eyes that Jesus Christ was publicly exhibited as crucified!' and that they received the Spirit by believing the proclamation (Galatians 3:1-2). Or the Thessalonians:

...we know, brothers and sisters beloved by God, that he has chosen you, ⁵because our message of the gospel came to you not in word only, but also in power and in the Holy Spirit

¹³ I refer to testimonies of those who have worked with organisations such as Interserve. I well recall one Anglican bishop describing the way illiterate peasants, nominally Hindu, had come to Christ because he had appeared to them in visions. That same bishop, once apparently highly suspicious of such things, told the audience that he now believed in signs and wonders because he had seen them for himself.

and with full conviction; ... ⁶in spite of persecution you received the word with joy inspired by the Holy Spirit, (1 Thess. 1:4-6).

In fact, all the churches mentioned in the New Testament, apart from those in Judea, had never seen Jesus. So how could Peter make his astounding claim:

Although you have not seen him, you love him; and even though you do not see him now, you believe in him and rejoice with an indescribable and glorious joy, ⁹for you are receiving the outcome of your faith, the salvation of your souls. (1 Peter 1:8-9)

The answer lies in understanding what has happened. Peter wrote later that 'baptism ... now saves you' (1 Pet. 3:21), though it was Paul who gave greater detail.

What then are we to say? Should we continue in sin in order that grace may abound? ²By no means! How can we who died to sin go on living in it? ³Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? ⁴Therefore we have been buried with him by baptism into death, so that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life.

⁵For if we have been united with him in a death like his, we will certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his. ⁶We know that our old self was crucified with him so that the body of sin might be destroyed, and we might no longer be enslaved to sin. ⁷For whoever has died is freed from sin. ⁸But if we have died with Christ, we believe that we will also live with him. ⁹We know that Christ, being raised from the dead, will never die again; death no longer has dominion over him. ¹⁰The death he died, he died to sin, once for all; but the life he lives, he lives to God. ¹¹So you also must consider yourselves dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus. (Rom. 6:1-11).

We must understand what has happened to us. When we were baptised we did not merely recall past events or even copy them. We became participants in the death of Christ. His death was our death, just as it was Paul's death. And if we participated in Christ's death then our baptism was a dynamic event (irrespective of its mode). With his usual energy, Luther summarised the issue.

Your baptism is nothing less than grace clutching you by the throat: a grace-full throttling, by which your sin is submerged in order that ye may remain under grace. Come thus to thy baptism. Give thyself up to be drowned in baptism and killed by the mercy of thy dear God, saying: 'Drown me and throttle me, dear Lord, for henceforth I will gladly die to sin with Thy Son.'¹⁴

This is being overwhelmed by grace, being 'in Christ'. So to the Colossians Paul said that the riches of the glory of the mystery are 'Christ in *you*, the hope of glory' (Col. 1:27).

Peter said that 'to you who believe he is precious' (1 Pet. 2:7). That is because faith is receiving *all* that he has given. So, in the words of 2 Corinthians 13:5,

Examine yourselves to see whether you are in the faith. Test yourselves. Do you not realize that Jesus Christ is in you?

Are we men and women of faith? Have we come to Jesus as the redeemer of sinners, as our redeemer, and do we trust him to do for us what we could not and would not otherwise do for ourselves? If we have, then it is because of his great work in us. Christ is in us and the faith we are exercising is his gift to us. And now we love him, and it is with a great eagerness that, having heard the promise, 'I am coming soon', we join the cry of the Bride for the day of the wedding, 'O Yes, Come Lord Jesus!' (Rev. 22:20).

¹⁴ Quoted in Karl Barth, *The Epistle to the Romans*, Edwyn C. Hoskyns (Trans), Oxford University Press, London, 1933, 1968, p. 194.

©Ian Pennicook, 17th February 2001