

2 Sam 6:1-5, 12b-19

Ephesians 1:3-14

Mark 6:14-29

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What Does It Mean To Be A Christian?

It is my firm belief that God gives life and God gives purpose. From the first hearing of God's call to the Last Call - when we are called home by our Maker - there is a God-intended purpose to our living. One of the tasks of living is to recognize God's purpose, and to live in accordance with that purpose.

Rick Warren's wildly popular book, *The Purpose Driven Life*, illustrates the yearning among people to find a sense of purpose in their living. In the 21st century we are awash with information, knowledge, images, sound bytes, data, consumer goods, comforts and conveniences. Yet after wading through all the clutter of daily living, people still ask what are we here for?

As we have lost the larger story, which the Christian faith provides, we find ourselves now with only our little stories. Our culture has become the battleground of many small dramas as people search for the real large story of which they are a part. Loss of confidence in a larger Christian view of life is the reason we [people] demand immediate gratification. We need a sense of being alive now, for now is all we have. Without a past that was planned for us, and a future that waits for us, we are trapped in the present. Yet there is not enough room for our souls in the present.¹

The first few lines of the letter to the Ephesians make up a hymn of thanksgiving. It's a hymn that addresses that basic question: why are we here? These few lines in Paul's letter touch upon purposeful living. While expressing thanksgiving to God for the blessings he has bestowed, these lines beautifully pull together the meaning and purpose of Christ, our Christian faith, and your life. The Christian life can be summed up in two words: "in Christ."

That phrase "In Christ," (expressed in various forms, such as "in him"), is repeated over thirty times in Ephesians. What does it mean to be "in Christ?" The answer begins like this: most people live their entire lives without ever knowing "WHY?" The most basic question a person can ask is, "What is the purpose of my life?" Many people answer that question by trying to be happy. People search for happiness through possessions, pleasure, knowledge, power, and prestige. But happiness is superficial and fleeting. *Contentment*, on the other hand, comes from knowing why you are here.

Paul writes "...just as he chose us in Christ before the foundation of the world to be holy and blameless before him in love. He destined us for adoption as his

¹Curtis, Brent and John Eldredge, *The Sacred Romance*, (Thomas Nelson, Nashville, 1997), 40, 43.

children through Jesus Christ, according to the good pleasure of his will..." (Eph. 1:4-5 NRSV).

God made you and me in order to love us. One purpose of life is to be loved by God, and to enjoy a personal relationship with God. When we know and love God, and live in harmony with his purpose for our lives, it results in a sure direction in living, contentment and confidence.

If it is so simple, then why don't more people find contentment? There's a problem: humans have a natural desire to control things and to ignore God's help and guidance for living. "It's my life and I'll do what I please!" This breaks up or prevents a close personal relationship with God. The Bible calls this attitude sin and says we all suffer from it. ("All we, like sheep, have gone astray, we have all turned to our own way." Isaiah 53:6 NRSV "If we say that we never sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us." 1 John 1:8 NRSV)

The result is that a lot of people ignore God and try to live their lives outside of His good purposes for us. But when your relationship with the One who gave you life is not right, it causes problems - in marriage and other relationships, in career, in finances, etc. When people have problems they often try many different ways of coping before turning to God. Even when we know that our deepest need is God, we often try unfruitful ways of getting close to God: "My mother was a Christian so...." "It doesn't matter what you believe, just be sincere." "I'll give up all my bad habits." "I'll work real hard and earn it." "I'll be religious and go to church." None of these ways really work. They all lead to a dead end.

But God ". . . is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance" (2Peter 3:9b). So God Himself came to earth as a human - Jesus - to bring us back to Himself. "For there is one God; there is also one mediator between God and humankind, Christ Jesus, himself human, who gave himself a ransom for all . . ." (1 Tim. 2:5 NRSV). This is quite simple, yet deep. God, through Christ, has adopted us into his immediate family, so we can have that personal relationship with him that was intended for us. Now God waits for each of us to accept what he has done for us. Accepting God's adoption is what it means to be a Christian. "For he chose us in him before the creation of the world to be holy and blameless in his sight. In love he predestined us to be adopted as his sons through Jesus Christ, in accordance with his pleasure and will" (Eph 1:4). No orphan child earns adoption. Our being adopted as children by God was not a result of our doing, but by the good pleasure of his will.

I often wonder if many of us church folks forget that we are "adopted" orphans. By nature we are not sons and daughters of God at all. We are God's creation, yet cut-off from God by our sin. We act as though God were our servant and not our Lord. We expect, or demand the right to have life turn out the way we want it. We are not humble enough, maybe, to live "in Christ." Maybe we have not been sufficiently disciplined by the righteousness of God.

The humble and grateful soul understands that unless God gives us status in the universe, “in accordance with his pleasure and will . . .” we are merely creatures of an hour and only dust of the earth. When all is said and done it is important what we do and how we live. But ultimately, when all is said and done, God gives purpose to our living. You are not here by accident; God has a purpose for your life. Will you accept his invitation, through Jesus, to join him?

[Jesus is always the gentleman, never forces us. “Listen! I am standing at the door, knocking; if you hear my voice and open the door, I will come in and abide with you” (Rev. 3:20 NRSV). When you open that door, I mean really open it, you answer his call and begin a great adventure. For he has predestined us for good works that he is able to accomplish in and through us.]

The phrase “in Christ” occurs 164 times in Paul’s letters and can be called the key to his theology. But he is not just describing some mystical, personal union with Jesus. Paul, like all early Christians, thought of himself as a member of Christ’s body. To be “in Christ” means not only to allow Christ into your life, but also to be in the household of God – along with all the other adopted children. “In Christ” means the unity of God’s people in Christ, under his leadership.

[E. Stanley Jones tells: “Twelve hundred high school girls signed decision cards in one meeting in Japan. That gave us cause for rejoicing. But one decision card stood out in meaningfulness. One girl wrote on the back of her decision card: ‘I am 100% for Christ, but I am only 50% for the church.’ She saw the difference. The Christian church was not Christian - except partially, probably 50%.”² This could easily be the cry and lament of thousands of people, including our friends and neighbors.]

[But the truth is, no one can be a Christian by him/herself. To be apart from fellowship is to be no longer “in Christ.” Commitment to Christ necessarily means commitment to other Christians. It means love of Christ as he lives in the fellowship of the local church. It’s not easy, but it is necessary. To be “in Christ” we must be in church. (We mostly don’t see one another outside of Sunday morning, so that time is all the more precious. This is vital for us as we move into God’s future for us as a congregation. Sunday morning here must be a top priority in your weekly schedule if all of us are to be witnesses to Christ to new generations.)]

Some observe that being “in Christ” doesn’t seem to make much difference. They say, “I don’t see much happening, I don’t hear a voice from heaven, I don’t feel any different.” Are we looking for quick fixes; superficial fixes that bring happiness for the moment? The distinctive offering Christians have for society is purposeful living and Christian character. It shows its power in quiet ways, worked out in family relationships, in daily decisions and priorities. Purposeful living shows when we stand up for Christ and his righteousness, especially when

²*The Reconstruction of the Church*, Abingdon Press, 1970, 11.

we're under pressure. Our purpose as a church is to produce transformed lives, developing Christ-like character. We are to be the people who are living "in Christ" on purpose.

"In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of his grace that he lavished on us." (Eph. 1:7) Because of that you can be assured that He has a good purpose for your life. We're not here by accident. We're worth dying for. He's offering each of us a place in his family and vital purpose in living.

"In Christ we have also obtained an inheritance, having been destined according to the purpose of him who accomplishes all things according to his counsel and will . . ." (Eph. 1:11)