



## **The Cross of Christ (part three)**

*By Jim Fowler, contributing writer*

### **Spiritual Identification with the Cross**

The "finished work" of God in Christ must not be considered only with theological objectivity. Christ's activity will of necessity affect us personally and subjectively. Though this might all be regarded as the theological significance of the cross, it is being separated under a different heading to emphasize the subjective elements of His death and life in the Christian, by referring to spiritual identification with the cross.

Previous mention has been made of an objective "spiritual solidarity" that all men have with Jesus Christ because He substitutionally took the death consequences of our sin. That "spiritual solidarity" becomes efficacious for us individually and subjectively when we receive by faith the complete death and life that God effects in Jesus Christ. The spiritual exchange of our regenerative conversion is the occasion of this personal spiritual identification.

Paul explains in Romans 6:6, *"that our old man was crucified with Him (Jesus Christ), in order that our body of sin might be done away with, so that we would no longer be slaves to sin."* It is important to observe several particulars of what Paul writes in this verse:

First of all, he employs a compound Greek word, *sustauroō*, which means *"to crucify together with."* This has often been referred to as the Christian's "co-crucifixion" with Jesus. It is best to avoid such terminology, as the English prefix "co-" can mean "jointly" or "together with." But it also can mean "equally," "in the same degree," or "as a complement to." We would not want to imply that our subjective crucifixion experience is of equal significance or in the same degree as the crucifixion of the Lord, Jesus Christ. Nor would we want to imply that our experience of being crucified is a complement to Christ's crucifixion, in order to complete it. Jesus said, *"It is finished"* (John 19:30) completed! Our having been "crucified together with" Jesus must be understood in terms of spiritual solidarity. When Jesus died on the cross, He died there *for* me, but He also died there *as* me. When He died, I died. I was "in Him" when He died. The entire human race was represented by Jesus when He took the death consequences for sin upon Himself, but that spiritual solidarity becomes personally and subjectively efficacious for me when I receive Jesus Christ by faith. The verb is an aorist tense indicating that "to have been crucified with Him" was a definite occurrence historically enacted when Jesus died on the cross, and which becomes experientially effective at the definite occasion of our spiritual conversion.

Secondly, Paul writes that our "old man" has been crucified together with Christ. The designation "old man" signifies our spiritual identity when we were a "man of old" in our old spiritual condition of un-regeneracy. Our pre-Christian identity was that of a "natural man" (1 Cor. 2:14), a "child of wrath" (Eph. 2:3), an "old man." That "old man" identity was "laid aside" (Eph. 4:22; Col. 3:9 [both NKJV], both aorist tense verbs) when we became Christians and received a "new man" identity (Eph. 4:24; Col. 3:10, both NKJV). The old spiritual identity of the unregenerate Jim Fowler is forever dead, having died with Jesus. I now have a new spiritual identity as a "new creature" (2 Cor. 5:17) in Christ, a "child of God" (John 1:12), a "spiritual" man

(1 Cor. 2:15; Gal. 6:1), a Christ-one - "Christian." This was made effective for me, in me, spiritually - when I received Jesus Christ by faith at conversion and regeneration. The "old man" is *not* synonymous with the "flesh" *nor* "indwelling sin" that remains residually in the soul of the Christian, *nor* is it to be equated with the unbiblical phrases such as "old nature," "sin nature," "Adam nature," "self," "sin principle," etc.

Thirdly, Paul explains that when this exchange of spiritual identity has taken place, our "old man" identity having been terminated and put to death, and our "new man" identity established in identification with the indwelling life of Jesus Christ, this spiritual exchange has practical implications for our behavioral expression. We are no longer "slaves to sin" - inevitably expressing the character of our old spiritual identification. Our physical bodies are no longer to be employed as the vehicle of sin expression, for such is misrepresentative of our new identity and the character of Christ who now lives in us, as Christians. Our behavior is intended to be a consistent expression of our new identity -- of the life of Christ. When writing to the Ephesians and Colossians, Paul also explains that the "new man" identity is to issue forth in consistent behavior (Eph. 4:25-32; Col. 3:12-17). We are to behave as who we have become "in Christ."

Galatians 2:20 is the only other figurative usage of the Greek word *sustauroō* within the New Testament. *"I have been crucified with Christ,"* Paul writes, using the perfect tense of the verb in the first person singular. Once again, he must be referring to the "old spiritual identity" he had as an unregenerate man. When Jesus died, that old unregenerate identity of Paul was put to death "in Him." Jesus died to effect our death, in order to change all men from "*sinners*" (Rom. 5:19) to "*saints*" (1 Cor. 1:2). *"It is no longer I (the old spiritual identity) who live, but Christ lives in me,"* Paul goes on to say. As Christians, we each have a new spiritual identity as a "Christ-one," a Christian. The indwelling Christ is the essence of my new spiritual identity. The Spirit of Christ is the dynamic of the out-living of His life in Christian behavior. Paul continues to explain: *"the life which I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave Himself up for me."* To require any additional legalistic requirements of performance or to demand any other criteria of "spirituality" is logically to imply that Christ "*died needlessly*" (Gal. 2:21), for such denies the "finished work" of Christ and sets aside grace.

Two additional references in Paul's correspondence with the Galatians also employ the Greek verb *staurō*, in explaining the consequences of this spiritual identification that all Christians have made with the crucifixion of Jesus. Galatians 5:24 indicates that *"those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified (aorist tense) the flesh with its passions and desires."* Spiritual identification with *"the spirit that is now working in the sons of disobedience"* (Eph. 2:2) has been terminated. There has been a cessation of the direct contact and inner empowering of the flesh patternings of behavior in the desires of our soul. The jurisdictional control whereby we were "slaves of sin" has been terminated. Likewise, in Galatians 6:14, Paul declares that through the cross *"the world has been crucified (perfect tense) to me, and I to the world."* Again, just as the contours of sinful patterning have been severed from their spiritual operative source, so the context of the collective expression of selfishness and sinfulness by the *"god of this world"* (2 Cor. 4:4) has ceased to have any claim or power or right or jurisdiction in our Christian lives. We are free to live by the life of Jesus Christ.

We have now referred to every pertinent reference to the "cross" and to the action of "crucifixion" in the New Testament -- every usage of the noun form *stauros*, the verb form *staurō*, and the compound verb form *sustauroō*. The historical event of Christ's death by crucifixion on a material cross outside of Jerusalem has theological significance as the "finished work" of God in Christ, inclusive of the subjective spiritual identification of our crucified old identity with the consequential disenfranchising of the flesh and the world.

The important observation which must now be made is that all of this action has been completed, accomplished, and fulfilled in the "finished work" of Jesus Christ exclaimed from the cross. There is no ongoing, continuous process of enacting, engaging, applying, or appropriating the crucifixion of Jesus in the life of a Christian. The effects of the crucifixion of Jesus were a completed objective reality at the time of Jesus' death, burial, resurrection, ascension, and Pentecostal outpouring, and were subjectively realized individually at the Christian's conversion. *"If anyone is in Christ, he is a new creature, the old things passed away (aorist tense); behold, new things have come (perfect tense)"* (2 Cor. 5:17). Every Christian has accepted spiritual solidarity with all that Christ has done, and spiritual identification with the death and life of Christ.

The verb tenses employed by Paul, which connect our subjective identification with Christ's objective death by crucifixion, all imply definite completed action. For example:

Rom. 6:6 - *"our old man was crucified (aorist) with Him (Christ)"* [NKJV]  
Rom. 6:7 - *"he who has died (aorist) has been freed (perfect) from sin"* [NKJV]  
Rom. 7:4 - *"you were made to die (aorist) to the Law"*  
Rom. 7:6 - *"having died (aorist) to that by which we were bound"*  
Gal. 2:19 - *"I died (aorist) to the Law, so that I might live to God"*  
Gal. 2:20 - *"I have been crucified (perfect) with Christ"*  
Gal. 5:24 - *"those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified (aorist) the flesh"*  
Gal. 6:14 - *"the world has been crucified (perfect) to me, and I to the world"*  
Col. 3:3 - *"you have died (aorist) and your life is hidden (perfect) with Christ"*

This is not to imply that our spiritual identification with the crucifixion of Jesus does not have behavioral implications. Indeed it does, but not in a continuing application of Christ's dying; rather, only as a consequence of the spiritual identification and participation in the "finished work" of Christ. A. B. Bruce remarked that "the ethical aspect of Christ's death is hardly touched on in the Pauline literature," and went on to note that Paul "contemplates the death of Jesus...exclusively from a religious and theological viewpoint."<sup>1</sup> This is a correct observation, but is not meant to deny that as a result of the objective theological significance and subjective spiritual identification, there will not be behavioral implications, as the life of Jesus Christ is lived out in the Christian.

The biblical passages, which immediately follow the statements of the theological significance of Christ's crucifixion, often proceed to consider behavioral implications. Having been crucified with Christ, we should *"no longer be slaves to sin"* (Rom. 6:6), but *"live with Him (Christ)"* (Rom. 6:8), *"bear fruit for God"* (Rom. 7:4), *"serve in newness of the Spirit"* (Rom. 7:6), be *"led by the Spirit"* (Rom. 8:14), *"live by faith in the Son of God"* (Gal. 2:20), and *"walk by the Spirit"* (Gal. 5:25) in the *"fruit of the Spirit"* (Gal. 5:22-23). On the basis of having exchanged our "old man" identification for a "new man" identification, there will be behavioral implications of *"righteousness and holiness"* (Eph. 4:24) with numerous practical expressions (cf. Eph. 4:25-5:21; Col. 3:12-17).

<sup>1</sup> Bruce, A.B. *St. Paul's Conception of Christianity*. Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1894.

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