

Reading on the Christian Position

by John Nelson Darby

The Christian position is one of being complete in Christ, with all the fulness of the Godhead going out to us.

Scripture: Romans 6:4, Colossians 2:11

Topics: "Unity in the Church", "Christian Identity"

Description

John Nelson Darby discusses the Christian position as revealed in Romans, Colossians, and Ephesians, emphasizing that believers are dead and risen with Christ, and seated in heavenly places. He explains the significance of circumcision in Colossians as a means to set aside Judaism, highlighting that true circumcision is found in being complete in Christ. Darby argues that life must precede death in the believer's experience, and that the fullness of God is available to those in Christ. He also addresses the role of the church and the importance of maintaining unity amidst challenges, emphasizing the need for faithfulness to God's calling. The sermon concludes with a call to remain steadfast in the truth of Scripture, despite the complexities of the current church state.

Transcript

As to the difference between the opening out of our position, in Romans, Colossians, and Ephesians, it may be well to note that, in Romans, we are dead with Christ; in Colossians, we are risen with Him; and in Ephesians, we are dead and risen with Him, and seated in the heavenlies in Him.

Ques. Why is there the introduction of circumcision in Colossians?

The immediate object is the setting aside of Judaism, for now that we have the true circumcision, we are viewed as complete in Him. Circumcision does not go beyond the putting off of the body of the flesh, either historically or in Colossians; it does not go beyond "putting off" (chap. 2:11). But though this is only negative, it is a big negative.

We do get something additional, and that is, what is put on; but, in itself, circumcision is not putting on. One must be in a new place before one can put on.

Israel had no one for them in Canaan, but we have Someone in the heavens. Until we are in Christ, and Christ in us, I do not believe we can be really circumcised, for I cannot reckon the body dead until I have got some other life. Life must come before death. That is the controversy we have with monks, and with the Irvingites; they said, death must come first; we said, life first. We cannot reckon ourselves dead to sin

until we have another life in which to reckon ourselves. The apostle is insisting that we are complete in Christ - Christ complete before God, and we in Him.

All the fulness of the Godhead goes out to us, and we are complete in it before God, and we have nothing else to look for.

Ques. Does circumcision bring out a heavenly Christ as that which is characteristic in Colossians?

Yes; all that we must have - One who is the Head of all principality and power. Circumcision is brought in here because they were in danger of going back from their position.

Ques. Should it read, "in whom," or, "wherein," in chapter 2: 3?

I think myself it should be wherein. In verse 12, "wherein" is in baptism.

281 Ques. Does Scripture ever say that we are risen in Him?

No, you could not say risen in Him, but with Him.

This is the only place where resurrection is connected with baptism. In Ephesians 2:5, 6, we are first of all quickened together with Christ, and then Jew and Gentile are raised up together. Generally speaking, baptism is death, but this passage in Colossians recognises risen with Him, but the object is, baptised to His death. And there we should remain if it were not for the faith of the operation of God. We have not 'raised with Christ' in Romans, either in baptism or out of it. We are looked at there as alive through, or rather, in Christ, but not alive with Christ.

Ques. Would you view the bread and wine in the same way as bringing before us not only Christ, but Christ as dead?

Yes; we are in Christ in heavenly places, and we partake of the Lord's supper in anticipation of the time when we shall all sit in glory with Him in our midst; it is as belonging to heaven, but if I ask, how did we get this place? there, we find the answer - the sufferings of Christ have brought us into it.

The great distinction is, that in Colossians it is life; in Ephesians, union and the Holy Ghost. In Colossians, we are risen with Christ, but not yet in heaven; the hope is laid up for us, and we are to set our affections there; but in Ephesians, we are viewed as sitting together in heavenly places in Christ, i.e., as gone to heaven!

Ques. In Ephesians 1:22, is it, or is it not, 'gave him to the church'?

It does not make much difference. He gave Him to the church, i.e., gave Him as Head to the body. That, at any rate, is the sense of it. It is the character in which He has been given. One cannot leave out the connection of Head with the church.

In Acts, we have the planting of the Church. This was the work of Peter and Paul, with a certain free ministry in between these two, such as that of Stephen, Philip, and Silas, etc.; and also of those who went everywhere preaching the word. The first apostles were at Jerusalem, taking up the Luke commission, for we have a distinct commission in each of the gospels.

In Matthew, they are sent out from Galilee, to disciple the Gentiles.

In Mark, they were to "preach the gospel to every creature.

He that believeth and is baptized," etc.

282 In Luke, repentance and remission of sins were to be preached, beginning at Jerusalem.

In John, the Lord says, "As my Father has sent me, even so send I you . . . whose soever sins ye remit," etc. And he breathes on them that they may receive the Holy Ghost. They are sent from Christ, in the power of the life in which He had been sent from the Father, to go to the world.

In the Acts, it is the Luke commission, and no other, carried out as far as it goes.

The testimony of Paul at Antioch in Pisidia in Acts 13 is just the same thing as Peter's in chapter 2. Both proclaim the fundamental facts of the gospel. Paul begins with the Jews there, though it was not Jerusalem. The Matthew commission would not have done for them at Jerusalem. But the baptism they were baptized to was before Mark's commission. Matthew says, "baptizing them," that is, not the Jews but, "all nations" Luke's commission extended to the nations as well, but beginning at Jerusalem.

Peter would not let Cornelius in, until God, so to say, had forced him. Acts 1 goes out to Samaria, Judea, and the ends of the earth.

The twelve begin at Jerusalem and go on to Samaria, but they would not let in the Gentiles until God compelled them to do so, after giving Peter a vision about it.

Ques. Is Matthew's commission still future?

It will, I suppose, be carried out in the future.

Ques. Will the Church at Jerusalem be resumed at the last?

The blessing will begin at Jerusalem, and they will go out and tell the nations that the glory has appeared, according to Isaiah 66.

After Matthias had been chosen, and the Holy Ghost had come down, the first thing we find is opposition from without; the apostles are put in prison, etc., etc., but there is real triumph, and back they go to their own company.

Then a difficulty arises from within, the widows murmuring, but grace completely overcomes that; the power of the Holy Ghost meets the need.

Then something worse occurs - the fall of Ananias and Sapphira. This is overcome by judgment. Divine power is there to meet every evil that comes in. Not that there is no evil, but it is met completely, and that, too, in a gracious way.

But the church is now no longer in her Pentecostal character.

Not that the power has ceased; there is still power enough now, if there is faith to use it. The coming in of power is according to what suits the need of the time.

283 Ques. It has been said that the closing verses of 1 Corinthians 5 cannot now be carried out, because there is not power to deliver to Satan?

That is confounding power with duty. When he says "Put away from among yourselves," it is a question of duty, not one of power. What you speak of is the denial of responsibility. If you mingle it with the delivering to Satan, there you want power, and if you have not got it, you make yourself foolish. Of course, God is able, as ever, to work a miracle. But suppose God should confer this power, say, on Romanists, or on the "Broad Church," He would be putting a seal upon that state of things. And so, too, with Independents, or any others. It would be putting in some shape or other a [kind] of testimony upon that which was out of the way. As long as there was unity in the church, if there was a rush of people to power there, they would find Christ behind it.

Suppose it were given to brethren, it would be like saying, 'you are right,' 'you are the church and no one else is.' We may of course fail in ministry; but the moment there arises a need in the church, faith may surely count upon Christ for supply.

Ques. When you put out anyone, where do you put him to?

You do not put him anywhere but "out." Say, it is out of this room, well, we put him out of the room, I do not know where to, we do not put him anywhere but out. Paul told the Corinthians that they ought to have prayed that such an one might be taken from them, that God would remove him; they ought, at any rate, to have felt that it was intolerable to have him in. I might suppose a case where we had to deal with one where there was not any Scripture for putting out, and yet it was felt that such an one was doing mischief "Cut off which trouble you," is not a question of discipline, but the putting such out of the way would be so. In connection with the deacons appointed, I should say that power met everything at the time. What was going on did not shew the activities of grace as they had been seen heretofore; those appointed were acting more officially than from the simple power of grace.

Ques. Many argue that in the state of decline in which we are now found, that is an example for us to put up with what we can; how would you meet this?

284 It is all a question of what the thing is. Take the case of deacons. Suppose you have a large gathering, and there is difficulty in distributing; I see no objection to certain ones taking the charge of it. But I could not say so of elders, because there are no apostles to appoint them. But, in such a case as I have supposed, I see no difficulty for two or three, at the wish of the others, to undertake this service.

Abstractedly, I see no difficulty. But the moment we find an elder among the churches formed by Paul, it is he and Barnabas that choose and ordain elders for them; Paul and Barnabas did it. There is the authority descending from Christ to the apostles, and again from the apostles. It might prove a failure, and no doubt it did.

Deacon (diakonos) is but a servant. Phoebe was one, and perhaps she swept the room where they met; I cannot tell what she did. "Diakonos" is not a slave.

Speaking of the seven, it says, "whom we may appoint over this business." All the names are those of Hellenist (Greekspeaking) Jews; grace was still working, though it was a proof of failure, too.

Well, that continues; Peter then goes throughout all quarters (Acts 9:32), and Antioch now comes in.

These deacons purchased to themselves a good degree; one of them, Philip, goes out, and we have a free ministry in exercise.

The Lord raises up these men.

With Paul, who has a direct, definite, apostolic calling, another characteristic is seen.

Then, over the matter of Stephen, a persecution breaks out, and all were scattered abroad, the apostles excepted.

Our Lord said to His disciples, that when they were persecuted in one city, they were to flee to another; but the apostles stayed at Jerusalem, carrying on the Jerusalem church as a centre. Those scattered went everywhere preaching the word. God uses persecution as a means of spreading the truth, and that is the first thing that carries it to the Gentiles at large. Some of them were men of Cyprus and Cyrene. The apostles might have expected the Lord up to the time that Stephen was killed, but henceforth Christ must sit down and wait, because both He and the Holy Ghost had been rejected.

285 Ques. Have you any thought as to there being a lapse of time between chapters 2 and 3 of the Acts?

No, nothing that I know of. There must have been some lapse of time, for their numbers had multiplied.

The prayer of Christ, "Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do," stopped for the time being the effect of the cross as regards the condemnation of Israel. Ministry went on, founded upon the coming of the Holy Ghost, and Peter calls them to save themselves from this untoward generation (chap. 2:40), and he adds, "I wot that through ignorance ye did it, as did also your rulers," chap. 3:17. He puts the nation upon their responsibility. It shewed that the man who owed ten thousand talents had been previously forgiven.

In rejecting Christ, they got into the debt; it was suspended in a sense - will you repent? But they would not repent, and they became resisters of the Holy Ghost come down. They were thus breakers of the law, killers of the prophets, killers of Christ, and resisters of the Holy Ghost. Stephen sees Christ standing on the right hand of God, not having yet sat down there, and the Jews take then the full character of adversaries, so that Christ must sit down until His enemies be made His footstool. When that time comes, He will rise up. Meanwhile, the offer to the nation has been closed.

Thereupon the disciples were all scattered from Jerusalem, which ceased to be any longer a church centre; but the apostles stayed on, and the ministry of the gospel went out. Next, we see Peter bringing in the first Gentile, that the unity of the church may still be seen. It was after Paul had been called, that Peter brings the first Gentile in; and then Paul is sent out to the Gentiles.

Paul has a distinct mission. He gets, so to speak, his credential letters which are peculiar: "Delivering thee from the people, and from the Gentiles, unto whom now I send thee." Paul was not really a man on the earth at all, for his calling had delivered him from both Jew and Gentile, and he belonged to Christ in glory; he did not know Christ after the flesh; but still, after calling Paul, the Lord took care to have Cornelius brought in by Peter, so that there should be no division. And Peter refers to this in Acts 15:7, 8.

Cornelius is called in in the general unity. Paul first goes up to Jerusalem, and disputes in the synagogues, and then he goes off to Tarsus. He is set aside for the time being, in order to learn that God does not want him, but that he wants God.

286 Then the work begins at Antioch, and Barnabas goes down there, and he and Paul set to work together with a Gentile church. A new ministry commences which had its practical credentials in Paul at

Damascus, a man who had been smashed to pieces and delivered from the people and from the Gentiles, and then was sent to Gentiles; a man who now belonged to heaven.

But this ministry was connected with the body of Christ, for He says, "'Saul, Saul, why persecutest thou me?" All these people are Myself.' The church was thus connected with a glorified Christ in heaven, and with a Jerusalem centre on earth. The danger of division was averted in Acts 15. Antioch had begun quite separately by the ministry of Paul and Barnabas. The Jews then come down, and they say, "You must be circumcised," etc., etc., and so the question is raised. Meanwhile Paul and Barnabas go out to preach, and we find elders are first appointed in chapter 14.

Ques. Is there any proof that our Lord did not sit down?

He is seen standing in chapter 7, and when He sits down, He sits down "until."

At Paul's conversion, the glory was revealed without anything being said to him of Christ's position.

Ques. What is the force of, "Have I not seen Jesus Christ our Lord?"?

He saw Him on the way to Damascus.

Ques. He surely saw the Lord personally, and not in heaven?

Just so, and therefore it had nothing to do with His position in heaven. The Lord was in no place then at all but Paul's eye and vision.

Paul saw Him afterwards in a trance in the temple, but these visions prove nothing as to the place He is holding in the dispensations of God.

Some went down from Jerusalem to Antioch with a Judaising scheme. A fresh start altogether had begun at Antioch where we have the mission of Paul sent forth by the Holy Ghost, in contrast with the mere free ministry such as Stephen's, and there was thus no longer any gathering to Jerusalem.

The great thing that then came out was, that looked at as a centre on earth, the Jerusalem church was gone, i.e., gone from the time of Stephen's death.

287 The Jerusalem church was not, however, given up because of Peter's opening the door to the Gentiles. Peter had followed Christ right up to the cloud - the glory; and as far as he was an eye-witness, he could say, 'The Man that you have rejected is the Man that God has exalted.' But Paul begins with a glorified Christ, and so takes another step forward; delivered from both Jews and Gentile, he knows only a glorified Christ, and saints united with this glorified Man. Paul starts on this ground, and the Holy Ghost, quite independently of Jerusalem, sends him out in keeping with his own special commission.

A fresh difficulty arises in chapter 15.

These Judaisers are not sent, but they go down and require circumcision; God did not, however, allow Antioch, nor the mission to Antioch, to settle that question. Supposing they had done so, it would not have been settled at Jerusalem, and there would then have been division. So after much disputation, Paul has a revelation that he should go up, with others, to the apostles, with the result that Jerusalem gives up her title to enforce Judaism. A very gracious dealing of the Lord.

Ques. Was the apostles' ministry founded on Luke's commission?

Yes. But free ministry was not founded on any particular commission.

The disciples were first called Christians at Antioch, and this was, I think, by men, not by the Holy Ghost. Peter recognises the name. A Christian is a person connected with Christ. They never could have given them that name at Jerusalem from the name Messiah. Christ is a Greek word.

As to the history of the Acts, we now drop Peter (except in prison), and all the rest is, you may say, the history of Paul and his labours until he gets into prison.

They make Antioch to be three years after Paul's conversion at Damascus, and then, "fourteen years after I went up again to Jerusalem."

That which was enjoined in Acts 15 had nothing to do with the law. Before the law, blood had been forbidden to Noah; as to the other matters, these were (1) faithfulness to God, and (2) faithfulness to man or woman as regards the marriage bond that God had created. Blood, idolatry, and fornication.

It was not a question of the law, but of God's tide; that is to say, life belonged to God, and man was not to corrupt himself as a creature. And God secured unity so far, though there always remained the difficulty with the Judaisers.

288 Ques. The question is sometimes raised, as to whether there is any warrant for a kind of synod of elders?

Well, in the first place, I do not suppose a synod would be bold enough to say, "It seemed good to the Holy Ghost, and to us." I have no idea of this representing all the churches and so acting; it was head of the Jewish system.

Ques. Do you suppose the apostles and elders were alone?

We read of none but apostles and elders; but the letter is addressed from all (verses 6 and 23). The people had been disputing ever so long before the apostles said anything. Peter and Paul were wise to let them expend themselves first.

Ques. How did it seem good to the Holy Ghost?

The apostles had authority and could say so; "the Spirit of truth . . . shall testify," and so "ye also shall bear witness, because ye have been with me from the beginning." It was thus through the Holy Ghost they bore their witness. The Holy Ghost is sent down to bear witness of what Christ is in heaven, and the apostles bore witness of what He was on earth.

"It seemed good to the Holy Ghost, and to us." I do not think this was their assembly, but what was done before. The letter was written in the name of the church, but the decree was in the name of the apostles and elders, and God bore them witness, giving them the Holy Ghost.

In James' citation (and he is quoting from the Septuagint), the point is, "all the Gentiles upon whom my name is called"; they were therefore not to trouble the Gentiles. As for "the tabernacle of David, which is fallen down," this has nothing to do with his object in quoting the passage.

Paul's ministry continues until we come to the elders at Miletus (chap. 20); and there, in a certain sense, he gives up his ministry though he might still preach. And he commends the elders to God, etc.

Ques. Can you link verse 21 with verse 28, putting verses 22-27 in a parenthesis, so as to connect the name of Jesus with the words, "His own blood"?

Well, I am satisfied God has purchased the church with the blood of One who belonged specially to Himself. If you take the 'editors,' you do not get "God" in that sentence at all. Athanasius condemned altogether the expression, 'blood of God.' My own conviction is that the 'editors' are right. In order to avoid the 'blood of God,' some have put in Kurios, the Lord, there.

289 Ques. Paul preached the "kingdom of God" everywhere, though he does not here enter into the full doctrine of it?

That is so. God is setting up a kingdom. The Church generally has lost the idea of the kingdom of God; people talk about 'being saved,' and say very little about the kingdom of God. We find an important testimony here, namely, that the loss of the apostles would leave an opening, in a way that did not exist before, for perverse men and wolves to enter in (a ground for watchfulness!) who would not spare the flock. There, is what the giving up of apostolic ministry leads to. In applying to the Jews the prophecy of Isaiah 6, the apostle Paul really closes up the ministry of the gospel to them.

The gospel goes into prison, and the Jews have their judgment sealed on them. The earthly thing had been merged in Paul's ministry, in which we see a special power raising him up with a special commission. But this ends in prison at Rome.

It is curious to notice that the church at Rome was founded, with Paul in prison and not in free apostolic ministry; and to me it is a very solemn thing to see where it all ends. I hope the Lord is keeping the present testimony unto His coming, and that because it is, in a sense, a testimony to failure - that the Church is in ruins; for then there will be no pretension to power, no apostles, no elders. The Lord has blown upon pretending to constitute anything, yet He is just as faithful as ever to minister to the need of the Church. It is for us to be faithful in the condition in which we are, but in accordance with that condition. There are two reasons for desiring the Lord to come; an affectionate desire for Himself, and seeing the state of things is so far from His glory, that He would come and put things right in a heavenly way. And yet it is just the time for us to be strong. I believe we have as much to lean on as Paul had, though we have not the same things to do. It is a time, I believe, of very great blessing if we are but content to follow Scripture with a single eye; but people get muddled up with the crooked ways going on around them.

I have sometimes seen upon a mountain that there is but one path which is simple and right; and a comfort indeed it is to know it, though there are ever so many crooked ones going over the heath. That is just where we are now. If a person has the right path, he does not need to inquire about the fifty wrong ones. "Let thine eyes look right on, and let thine eyelids look straight before thee." If I look on, I see Christ, and then all is easy, and with my eyes on Him, I go straight.

290 A broad path means a broad conscience, not a broad heart.

We have a narrow path, but it is a known path, and a straight one.

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