

Distinctiveness

by Watchman Nee

Watchman Nee's sermon emphasizes the distinctiveness of believers as those called out from the world to live a life rooted in Christ's redemptive power.

Scripture: Exodus 6:6, John 3:6, John 8:23, John 15:19, John 17:14-15, 1 Corinthians 1:30, Colossians 1:13-14, 1 John 5:4, Revelation 21:10

Topics: "Identity in Christ", "Distinctiveness"

Description

Watchman Nee emphasizes the distinctiveness of believers in Christ, highlighting that their origin is from above, while the world is beneath. He explains that Christians are 'called-out ones,' chosen by God to live a life that is fundamentally different from the world, which cannot produce true Christians. Nee illustrates that this divine life within believers is a barrier against the world's influence, and that their identity is rooted in being part of the Body of Christ. He reassures that while Christians live in the world, they are not of it, and their distinctiveness is a safeguard against worldly absorption. Ultimately, believers are called to engage with the world, reflecting their heavenly origin and the life of Christ within them.

Transcript

May I now invite your attention to words Jesus dressed to the Jews in John 8:23. "Ye are from beneath; I am from above: ye are of this world; I not of this world." I wish us to note especially here the use of the words "from" and "of." The Greek word in each case is ek, which means out of and implies origin. Ek tou kosmos is the expression used: "from, or of, or out of, this world." So the sense of the passage is: "Your place of origin is beneath; my place of origin is above. Your place of origin is this world; my place of origin is not this world." The question is not: Are you a good or a bad person? but, What is your place of origin? We do not ask, Is this thing right? or, Is that thing wrong? but, Where did it originate? It is origin that determines everything. "That which is born of the flesh is flesh: that which is born of the Spirit is spirit" (John 3:6).

So when Jesus turns to his disciples he can say, using the same Greek preposition, "If ye were of the world (ek tou kosmos), the world would love its own: but because ye are not of the world, but I chose you out of the world, therefore the world hateth you" (John 15:19). Here we have the same expression, "not of the world," but in addition we have another and more forceful expression, "I chose you out of the world." In this latter instance there is a double emphasis. As before there is an ek, "out of," but in addition to this the verb "to choose," eklego, itself contains another ek. Jesus is saying that his disciples have been

"chosen-out, out of the world."

There is this double ek in the life of every believer. Out of that vast organization called the cosmos, out of all the great mass of individuals belonging to it and involved in it, out, clean out of all of that, God has called us. Thence comes the title "Church," ekklesia, God's "called-out ones." From the midst of the great cosmos God calls one here and one there; and all whom he calls he calls out. There is no such thing as a call from God that is not a call "out of" the world. The church is ekklesia. In the divine intention there is no klesia which lacks the ek.

If you are a called one, then you are a called out one. If God has called you at all then he has called you to live in spirit outside the world system. Originally we were in that Satanic system with no way of escape; but we were called, and that calling brought us out. True, that statement is a negative one, but there is a positive side also to our constitution; for as the people of God we have two titles, each of them significant according to the way we view ourselves: If we look back at our past history we are ekklesia, the Church; but if we look to our present life in God we are the Body of Christ, the expression on earth of him who is in heaven. From the standpoint of God's choice of us we are "out of" the world; but from the standpoint of our new life we are not of the world at all, but from above. On the one hand we are a chosen people, called and delivered out of the world system. On the other we are a regenerate people, utterly unrelated to that system because by the Spirit we are born from above. So John sees the holy city coming down "out of heaven from God" (Rev. 21:10). As the people of God, heaven is not only our destiny but our origin.

This is an amazing thing, that in you and me there is an element that is essentially otherworldly. So otherworldly is it indeed that no matter how this world may progress, it can never advance one step in likeness to that. The life we have as God's gift came from heaven and never was in the world at all. It has no correspondence with the world but is in perfect correspondence with heaven; and though we must mingle with the world daily, it will never let us settle down and feel at home there.

Let us consider for a moment this divine gift, this life of Christ indwelling the heart of regenerate man. The apostle Paul has a great deal to say about this. In an illuminating passage in 1 Corinthians he makes a striking twofold statement: (a) that God himself has placed us in Christ, and (b) that Christ has been "made unto us wisdom from God: righteousness and sanctification and redemption" (1:30). Here are examples of the whole range of human need that God has met in his Son. We have shown elsewhere how God does not distribute to us these qualities of righteousness, holiness and so on in installments "to be taken as required." What he does is to give us Christ as the inclusive answer to all our needs. He makes his Son to be my righteousness and my holiness, and everything else I lack, on the ground that he has already placed me in Christ crucified and risen.

Now I would draw your attention to the last word, "redemption." For redemption has a great deal to do with the world. The Israelites, you will recall, were "redeemed" out of Egypt, which at that time was all the world they knew, and which is for us a figure of this world under Satanic rule. "I am Jehovah," God said to Israel, "and I will redeem you with a stretched out arm." So God brought them out, setting a barrier of judgment between them and Pharaoh's pursuing host, so that Moses could sing of Israel as "the people which thou has redeemed" (Exod. 6:6; 15:13).

In the light of this, let us now take Paul's double statement. If (a) God has placed us in Christ, then since Christ is altogether out of the world, we too are altogether out of the world. He is now our sphere, and being in him, we are by definition out of that other sphere. The Father "delivered us out of the power of

darkness, and translated us into the kingdom of his dear Son; in whom we have our redemption" (Col. 1:13, 14, A.V.). This transfer was the subject of our last two chapters.

Furthermore, if also (b) Christ is "made unto us redemption"-if that is to say, he is given to us to be that-then that means that within us God has set Christ himself as the barrier to resist the world. I have met many young Christians trying to resist the world, trying in one way or another to live an unworldly life. They found it very hard and, moreover, such effort is of course wholly unnecessary. For by his own essential "otherness" Christ is our barrier to the world, and we need nothing more. It is not that we must do anything in relation to our redemption, any more than the people of Israel did anything in relation to theirs. They simply trusted in God's redeeming arm outstretched on their behalf. And Christ is made to us redemption. In my heart there is a barrier set up between me and the world, the barrier of another kind of life, namely that of my Lord himself, and God has set the barrier there. And because of Christ, the world cannot reach me.

What need therefore have I to try either to resist or to escape the system of things? If I look within myself for something with which to meet and overcome the world, I instantly find everything within me crying out for that world, while if I struggle to detach myself from it I simply become more and more involved. But let the day once come when I recognize that within me Christ is my redemption, and that in him I am altogether "out." That day will see the end of struggling. I shall simply tell him that I can do nothing at all about this "world" business, but thank him with all my heart that he is my Redeemer.

At risk of monotony let me say again: the character of the world is morally different from the Spirit-imparted life we have received from God. Fundamentally it is because we possess this new life of God's gift that the world hates us, for it has no hatred for its own kind. This radical difference leaves us indeed with no way of making the world love us. "If ye were of the world, the world would love its own: but because ye are not of the world, but I chose you out of the world, therefore the world hateth you."

When the world meets in us a natural human honesty and decency, it appreciates this, and is ready to pay us due respect and place in us its confidence. But as soon as it meets that in us which is not of ourselves, namely the divine nature of which we have been made partakers, its hostility is at once aroused. Show the world the fruits of Christianity and it will applaud; show it Christianity and it will oppose it vigorously. For let the world evolve as it will, it can never produce one Christian. It can imitate Christian honesty, Christian courtesy, Christian charity, yes, but to produce one single Christian it can never aspire. A so-called Christian civilization gains the recognition and respect of the world. The world can tolerate that; it can even assimilate and utilize that. But Christian life the life of Christ in the Christian believer: that it hates, and wherever it meets it it will assuredly oppose it to the death.

Christian civilization is the outcome of an attempt to reconcile the world and Christ. In Old Testament figure we see that represented by Moab and Ammon, the fruit indirectly of Lot's involvement and compromise with Sodom; and neither Moab nor Ammon proved any less hostile to Israel than were the heathen nations. Christian civilization proves that it can mix with the world, and may even be found taking the world's side in a crisis. There is one thing, however, that is eternally apart from the world and can never mix with it, and that is the life of Christ. Their natures are mutually antagonistic and cannot be reconciled. Between the finest specimen of human nature the world can produce and the most insignificant Christian there is no common ground, and thus no basis of comparison. For natural goodness is something we had by natural birth and can by our own resources naturally develop; but spiritual goodness is, in John's words, "begotten of God" (1 John 5:4).

God has established in the world a universal Church; and in one place and another he has planted many local churches. God, I say, has done this. It would be unreasonable therefore to expect that his way of deliverance from the world would be by physical separation from it. But as a consequence many sincere Christians are greatly perplexed by the problem of absorption. If God plants a local church here, will it, they ask, one day be reabsorbed by the world?

That in fact presents no problem to the living God. Inasmuch as its origin is not of the world, there is in the family of God no correspondence whatever with the world and thus no possibility of the world absorbing it. This is of course no credit to us, his children. It is not because we earnestly desire to be heavenly that the Church is heavenly, but because we are born out of heaven. And if, by our heavenly origin, we are absolved from trying to work our way there, we are absolved also thereby from studying to keep ourselves physically clear of this world.

How can the world possibly mix with what is otherworldly? For all that is of the world is empty dust, whereas all that is of God has the miraculous quality of divine life. Some of our brothers in Nanking were once assisting in relief work after the bombing of the city by Japanese planes. Suddenly, as they stood before a shattered house wondering where to begin, there was a violent upheaval of bricks and timbers, and a man emerged. Shaking the dust and rubble from him he rose and struggled to his feet. The fallen beams and rafters fell back into place behind him and the dust settled again, but out he walked alive! While there is life what fear is there of mixture?

The prayer of Jesus to his Father which John records in Chapter 17 contains a plea that is most arresting. Having repeated the statement that "the world hated them, because they are not of the world, even as I am not of the world," Jesus continues: "I pray not that thou shouldest take them from (ek) the world, but that thou shouldest keep them from (ek) the evil one" (verses 14, 15).

Here we have an important principle which will occupy our next chapter. Christians have a vital place in the world. Though saved from the evil one and his system they have not yet been removed from his territory. They have a part to play there for which they are indispensable. Religious people, as we saw, attempt to overcome the world by getting out of it. As Christians, that is not our attitude at all. Right here is the place where we are called to overcome. Created distinct from the world, we accept with joy the fact that God has placed us in it. That distinctiveness, our gift from God in Christ, is all the safeguard we need.

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