

# WHO AM I -- REALLY?

by Ray C. Stedman

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This morning we reach those dramatic two words, "The End." We have come to the last of our studies in Second Corinthians and this concludes our series on the Corinthian Epistles.

I am scheduled to speak next Sunday, but I am going to speak on another subject. I am going to address the subject, "Are We In The Last Days?" Many people are asking that question, so bring your survival kit with you and we will head for the hills right after the meeting is ended!

This has been a rich time of study together. We have seen that the conditions at Corinth were so like conditions in California today. In fact, if Peninsula Bible Church had all the troubles that Corinth had, I would have given up on it a long time ago. But Paul has not given up on Corinth. How patiently he has worked with this church. His letters, and the visits he made, and those of his associates, span a period of from one to three years. All that time he labored to try to correct the things that were wrong, to bring that church to an effective, impacting ministry there in that great commercial city.

But now as we come to the close of this Corinthian letter, Paul has said about all that he can say. Most of the church has repented and changed its attitude toward him, and he has rejoiced over that. But there is a handful of people there who are still following the false teachers who had come in, and there are still some who are living in licentiousness and open immorality. The apostle has already told them that there is nothing left except public exposure when he comes, and when he comes, he says, he is going to do this with them.

Now, before he does come, he faces them with one final question which he hopes will change their attitude and make them clear up their difficulties.

This question is found in Chapter 13, Verse 5.

**Examine yourselves, to see whether you are holding to your faith. Test yourselves. Do you not realize that Jesus Christ is in you? -- unless indeed you fail to meet the test!**  
{2 Cor 13:5-6 RSV}

Is Jesus Christ in you?

Paul exhorts every individual in the church to ask himself that question. This, of course, is because all wrong behavior leads at last to that question. Somewhere, somehow, when we are out-of-line with Christian standards we have to ask ourselves, "Am I a true Christian or am I a counterfeit? Have I been born again or am I only putting up a front?"

Those of us who are Christians ought to ask ourselves that occasionally. It is a good idea to examine yourself, that is what the apostle says, especially if there is any kind of wrong behavior involved.

Some of you read a couple of weeks or so ago an article in the *San Francisco Chronicle* about Eldridge Cleaver, in which he made some statements and referred to some attitudes and behavior on his part that are inconsistent with the Christian profession. Now many people are asking: "Is Eldridge Cleaver really a Christian." That immediately becomes moot when there is behavior that is not in line with the Christian position. Others ask it, and as the apostle makes clear here, it is a good thing to ask it of yourself.

My prayer for Eldridge is that he is asking this question about himself right now: "Am I a Christian? Have I really been changed? Is Jesus Christ living in me?"

Now the very fact that the apostle could ask a question like that indicates that is what marks true Christianity. A

Christian, of course, is not simply one who joins a Christian church. Many people feel that is the criterion, but it is not. There are millions of church members in this country today who are not Christians. Nor does adhering to a certain moral standard in your life, or the fact that you consistently read the Bible make you a Christian. The thing that really marks it is if Jesus Christ is living in you. A true Christian is someone in whom Christ dwells. And the person in whom Christ dwells will have certain inescapable evidence of that fact given to him or her.

That is what Paul is suggesting we ask ourselves. Do we have the evidence that Jesus Christ lives in us? Has a fundamental change occurred at the very depths of our being? It is actually the question, of course, "Are you really born again?" That is a term that has fallen into wrong use these days. Many people who merely change their actions for a little while are said to be "born again." People are using that term about everything today. But this is the question that Paul is asking, "Are you truly and permanently different because Jesus Christ has come to live within you?"

You may be asking, "How can I know that?" Well, the answer is found in several places in Scripture. For instance, Scripture speaks of an "inner" witness. In Romans Paul says, "God's Spirit bears witness with our spirit that we are the children of God," {cf, Rom 8:16}. That is one way you know. There is an inner testimony, a feeling, a sense within produced by the Spirit of God who dwells within that you are part of the great family of God. If we are really born again this will be a mark that we have occasionally borne to our hearts, the "witness of the Spirit that we are the children of God." Scripture suggests that this will sometimes take the form of a sense of identity with God as a Father. Our spirits will occasionally want to cry out, "Abba, Father." That is an intimate term for father. We no longer see God as our judge waiting to condemn us, we see him as a loving Father who is concerned for us, whose arms are around us and who loves us deeply.

I had the joy of pointing my barber to Christ a year or so ago. This past week, while I was having my hair cut, he was telling me about the changes that have occurred in his life because he has become a Christian. (One of the great changes is that he gives me free haircuts! That is an almost infallible mark that he has been born again, especially when haircuts are running \$7.00 or \$8.00 today!) He told me how confident he feels within, and that many of his friends have been noticing this. They have been telling him, "You are so confident. Where do you get that feeling?" (Some of them have actually been accusing him of conceit because of his sense of confidence.) He told me, "They don't understand what I feel within, but I'm confident because," (and this is the way he put it), "I have a deep sense that Daddy is with me all the time." That is the witness of the Spirit. So one of the chief marks that we are Christians is that Christ is in us.

Scripture also speaks of a sense of "inner peace." In Romans 5 the apostle says, "Having been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ," {cf, Rom 5:1}. The sense of conflict with God is ended; the war is over, we are conscious that the problem of our evil, our sin no longer troubles God. The work of Christ has satisfied his justice, therefore we have a sense of peace. We have a sense of destiny. We are going to go to heaven when we die. That is settled and sure not because of anything we have done, but because of what Christ has done. Now that peace is a mark of the witness of the Spirit that Jesus Christ is in us.

Scripture speaks also of new desires that are born in the heart of a new Christian. First Peter 2:2 says, "As newborn babes, desire the sincere milk of the word, that you may grow thereby." One of the marks of born again believers is that they have a deep and sudden thirst for the Word of God, a hunger to be fed, to know the truth of God. This ought to continue all our lives.

The Bible is a fascinating book. It speaks with tremendous interest to the things that are essential to our knowledge. There should be a hunger to know it. This week I saw a video tape of a woman Bible teacher telling the story of her conversion. Though she had been a church member all her life, and had read the Bible from time to time, it really was not a very interesting book to her. But the moment she was born again she had a tremendous hunger to know the Word of God. She haunted church services everywhere, she went to every meeting she could because she could not get enough of Bible study. That is one of the marks that Christ is in you. Even as a much older Christian I find that there are times in my experience when I am under pressure, feeling bored, or whatever, that the only thing that will speak to me is to read one of the Psalms. How that ministers to my heart. Now the Spirit of God creates that hunger, and, if Christ is in you, this will be one of

the marks of it. Because you understand that what Christ did, he did for you, a fundamental change has already occurred in your life. The Spirit of God has entered and released to you the life of Jesus so that it is literally true that Jesus Christ lives in you.

That is what Paul says he wants these Corinthians to ask themselves, "Does Christ live in you? Have you been transferred from the kingdom of Satan to the kingdom of God by faith in Jesus Christ?"

Now this inner change will also produce an outward change, which is not all subjective. We can answer the question, "Is Jesus Christ in you?" by observing our conduct, because the inner change will produce a different attitude toward our behavior. One of the striking things about new Christians is that they invariably begin to manifest a totally different attitude toward things they once thought OK. Some of them had been living in sexual immorality, perhaps, indulging in regular or frequent acts of fornication or involved with sexual perversion of some sort, and had accepted these things, as they are widely accepted today, as being OK. But when they were born again, they suddenly saw these things as injurious and hateful. They no longer wanted to have a part in them. They may have struggled in that, but their desire was now different. In some of the more open and blatant forms of evil, such as attitudes about lying or drunkenness or stealing, you find immediately that your attitude is changed. That is because Christ lives in you, and light can have no part with darkness. Christ cannot have part with Belial. Even your attitude toward your own selfishness changes. You see how selfish you have been. It looks ugly and distasteful in your eyes and you want to be free from it.

It is right here that problems arise in the Christian life. There are many people who truly have been born again who, in the initial years of their Christian experience, did change, but later on, as Christianity became more old hat to them, as it lost its newness and its freshness, they began to drift back into old patterns that are wrong. Under the pressure of their peers or their circumstances, they allowed themselves to get involved again in things that they once had forsaken as Christians. When that happens, it raises the question we have been asking, "Are you really a Christian? Were you born again? Has the change occurred?" Because it is also true that many people who think, for one reason or another, they have become Christians, who feel that because they went through a certain experience or had a certain feeling at a given time, who have never really surrendered to the Lordship of Jesus and seen him as rightful Lord of their lives, they too can get back into things they once left; they too can give way. There is no difference in their behavior from somebody who is genuine Christian but has slid back into this. So the question, "Are you really a Christian?" is raised at that point.

This is what Paul is doing. "Examine yourself," he says. "Others who are watching you cannot answer that question. They do not know whether something you have been doing is only temporary or if it is real with you. They cannot tell, but you can."

Here is the issue: The question you have to ask at that point is, "How do you feel about this behavior?" Are you glad to get back to it? Do you see it as something that represented a kind of religious kick you were on, but you are glad to get back where you can be "normal" and live like everybody else, or do you hate yourself for doing it? That will tell the story. How do you feel about it? Do you justify it? Do you want to go on with it, or do you inwardly hate yourself, and wish you were free from it? Are you sorry you went back to it and long to be freed again by the power of Jesus Christ? That is the question Paul is asking the Corinthians.

I hope every one of us will occasionally ask ourselves the same question. Are we holding to our faith? Our behavior tells the story. If we really believe what we are told to believe, we are going to be different. What you think about yourself tells the story of what you are going to do; that governs how you act. We all know that instinctively. Have you ever said to yourself or to somebody else, "Who do you think you are anyhow, doing this sort of thing?" That is a revelation that you instinctively know that it is what people think themselves to be that will govern and control their behavior. So this question here is the most important one you can ask yourself: "Are you really Christian? Who do you think you are? Have you been changed? Who are you -- really?"

The answer to that question, Paul says, will also answer the question that these Corinthians were asking about him, for they were asking, "Is Paul really an apostle? Has he failed us as an apostle of Christ? Are these other men who came in and taught us different things right? Is Paul the phony apostle?" Now Paul says, "When you

answer the question about yourself, you will have the answer to the one about me. If you find that you are real Christians then you will also know that I am a real apostle."

Listen to the way he puts it. Verse 6:

**Examine yourselves, to see whether you are holding to your faith. Test yourselves. Do you not realize that Jesus Christ is in you? -- unless indeed you fail to meet the test! I hope you will find out that we have not failed. But we pray God that you may not do wrong -- not that we may appear to have met the test, but that you may do what is right, though we may seem to have failed. For we cannot do anything against the truth, but only for the truth. For we are glad when we are weak and you are strong. What we pray for is your improvement. {2 Cor 13:6-9 RSV}**

Paul explains that he is not looking for an opportunity to come and demonstrate his authority as an apostle by judging them; he takes no delight in flexing his apostolic muscle. He would be quite happy if they would judge themselves and stop their evil behavior, leaving nothing for him to do when he comes but to rejoice with them. In fact, he says, "I would be quite willing to let you go on thinking that we are kind of weak as an apostle, that we do not really amount to very much, that we are only a paper tiger, as long as your behavior changes in line with who you really are." What he wants is their moral improvement, not an opportunity to personally exhibit what a true apostle he is.

Verse 10 he says something which is very important:

**I write this while I am away from you, in order that when I come I may not have to be severe in my use of the authority which the Lord has given me for building up and not for tearing down. {2 Cor 13:10 RSV}**

That is a principle that is often forgotten today. The apostle makes clear that true authority in the church, even beginning with the apostles, is not intended to destroy people or tear them down; it is to build them up. In other words, apostolic power is not to boss people with. It is not given so that somebody can lord it over the brothers. Everywhere in the Word of God we are warned against that idea of leadership.

Yet as I travel around I find many churches where one man is ensconced as the pastor. His concept of that role is that he is in authority in the church. He alone can pronounce on doctrine; he alone has the right to determine who is going to exercise spiritual gifts in the congregation; he alone is the final, authoritative teacher. But Scripture warns against that. It warns against "lording" it over the brethren, bossing them and regulating the intimate details of their lives. Paul makes clear that that is not the kind of authority even he, as an apostle, has. It is not a totalitarian control over all the details of someone's life.

Just this week I heard an account of a church where certain elders hold this idea of having command authority over others. These elders were concerned about a certain couple who lived in the same apartment building with them. They felt that the wife was not submissive to her husband, so they told her that in order to demonstrate a proper attitude of submission, she had to get written permission from them for a whole year to even leave the building. She said that once her mother got very sick but she could not leave the house until she had gotten written permission from these elders. They did not happen to be home so it created a very serious emergency.

Now that is the kind of authority that is everywhere condemned in the Word of God. Even the apostle said his authority is given to build people up, to encourage them, to support them, to restore them and renew them. If discipline is called for, it is a last resort. Note how reluctant he is to bring this about, how long he gives them to correct conditions. When he does move, he says, it will be in line with what the Lord has said in Matthew 18. He will move step-by-step, looking to God, not to the congregation, to bring pressure on the individual, and that the discipline will cease immediately upon repentance of the person involved. So we have a clear word here from Paul about what the church ought to be like. Especially it depends, he says, on the answer to that all-important question, "Does Jesus Christ live in you or not?"

Paul's last word is an appeal for mutual support among the brethren. Verse 11:

**Finally, brethren. farewell. Mend your ways, heed my appeal, agree with one another, live in peace, and the God of love and peace will be with you. Greet one another with a holy kiss. All the saints greet you.**

**The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ and the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all. {2 Cor 13:11-14 RSV}**

It is wonderful that this last word is a word of peace. The apostle sees beyond all the fragmentation in Corinth to the basic unity of the church. God created that unity. It is there even though there is divisiveness, quarreling, jealousy and division in the assembly. Christians belong to each other. They are part of the family of God and they ought to act that way, he says. Beyond the rebellion he sees the grace and the power of God which is able to heal these breaches and restore people even to the point where they are able to give a holy kiss to one another. That was the standard greeting of that day. (We have lost that today, although when I was in Poland I noticed that they still retain that. Today we have substituted a handshake, but I am happy to see hugs coming back in again. Hugs are a much warmer and more accurate expression of Christian love and acceptance, one with another.)

The apostle is urging this upon these Christians: "Change your ways. If Jesus Christ is in you, you can do it." That is his point. You cannot go on living like everybody else if Jesus Christ lives in you. This is the fundamental reason why there must be a difference in Christians.

I was driving down the freeway the other day and a car cut in front of me, almost driving me off the road, then it cut in ahead of the car ahead of me. I noticed a bumper sticker on it that said, "The difference in me is Jesus." Well, I was not much impressed, and neither is the world impressed when they look at us and see us behaving just like everyone else. We are not to behave that way in our personal lives because Christ is in us. We are not to behave in our corporate life that way because Christ is among us. We are to be friendly, loving, open, forgiving, not condemnatory, narrow and bitter. We are different because Christ is among us.

Notice how the apostle closes. What a beautiful greeting this is. It is the clearest reference to the Trinity that there is in the New Testament:

**The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ and the love of God and the fellowship [or commonality] of the Holy Spirit be with you all. {2 Cor 13:14 RSV}**

What a gracious word from this great apostle as he closes this letter to the church at Corinth.

History does not tell us what happened in the church there, whether it was able to recover and obey this word or not. But Paul has done his best. He has left with us a tremendous testimony as to what constitutes Christianity at work in a pagan world.

We are called to live in Corinthian conditions today, here in California especially. I hope and pray that these letters to the Corinthian church will mean much to us, that we too will obey the word of the apostle and recognize that, when Jesus Christ is among us, we cannot be the same kind of people. This is the issue.

May God grant that we will understand this more thoroughly in days to come.

## **Prayer**

Thank you, Lord, that you are among us. You have sent us out into this world. As you yourself said, "Go into all the world and preach the gospel to every creature and make disciples of the nations. Lo, I am with you even unto the end of the age." We may not have reached the end of the age yet, Lord Jesus, but we thank you that you are among us and that you constitute us, therefore, the Body of Christ. Your presence makes that true. We pray that we may behave as men and women, boys and girls in whom Jesus Christ lives. For we pray in your name, Amen.

Title: Who am I -- Really?  
By: Ray C. Stedman  
Series: Studies in Second Corinthians  
Scripture: 2 Cor 13:5-14  
Message No: 23  
Catalog No: 3698  
Date: June 1, 1980

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