

QUESTION:

“Is Christ IN all people or is Christ only IN Christians or only in some Christians?”

RESPONSE:

A good number of Scriptures refer *exclusively* to Christian believers as being “*in Christ*.” But there is also another set of texts—*inclusive* passages that say Christ united himself to *all* humanity.

Both Scripture sets are true. They are simply referring to different truths. Simply put, some Scriptures define our *Being* (all are *in Christ* through the Incarnation) and others describe our *Relationship* (not all relate to Christ by faith).

If Christ united himself to *all* humanity, is he *IN all*, or is Christ only *IN some*—in those who unite themselves to him by faith? Asked another way, are *all* “saved” but just don’t know it yet? Or are we only “saved” when we respond to Christ? And there the debate rages (sometimes with actual rage!).

The impasse boils down to our age-old propensity for literalizing metaphors, then stumbling over them. It’s only a problem when we think “IN” and “OUT” are literal locations rather than spatial metaphors.

“IN Christ” and “Christ IN you” are metaphors, my friends! Or rather, a whole set of metaphors used in various ways in the Bible—and not uniformly!

Having “Christ IN you” or being “IN Christ” can mean



“Is Christ in all people or only in Christians?”

different things in different contexts. You can have Christ *IN all* in one passage and Christ *IN Christians* in another.

The following categories help distinguish five types of biblical *IN*-ness:

1. UNION/INCLUSION

This refers to the union of the Triune God to the human race in the Person of Jesus Christ. Passages such as Romans 5, 1 Corinthians 15 and Colossians 1 overtly describe how the Incarnation of Christ includes *all* humanity in his work of forgiveness and reconciliation.

Paul says, “*As in Adam ALL die, so in Christ, ALL are made alive*” (1 Corinthians 15:22).

These Scriptures describe how Christ’s universal saving act effects the human race, overcoming and exceeding the curse of Adam. “IN” in these cases speaks to being within the

intentions and effects of God’s saving love—so high, wide, long and deep that it encompasses *all*. This truth needs special renewed attention today.

That said, alongside the all-inclusive embrace of Christ’s cosmic union, we have many other categories of “IN-ness” in the New Testament. While Christ is *IN all* via Christ’s saving work—at least four other “IN/OUT” metaphors are contingent on our response and thus narrower in scope than universal inclusion. Remember, these are metaphors!

2. IDENTIFICATION/FELLOWSHIP

Just as Christ’s identification with us takes us “into him” (that is, an open door to relationship), so our identification with Christ welcomes him “into us” (into our lives, our mess, our business). Identification treats “IN” not as a place such as my “heart” but as a

description of how I relate to Christ.

Example: Paul, addressing Christians, says: *“I pray that out of his glorious riches Abba may strengthen you with power through his Spirit in your inner being, so that Christ may dwell IN your hearts through faith”* (Ephesians 3:16-17).

What? Isn't Christ in every heart? Yes, by the Incarnation. Or at least every believer's heart? Yes. By identification. But Paul is suggesting a more specific type of indwelling—through a greater revelation of *Abba's* love by the grace of the Holy Spirit.

The focus on Love and the Trinity in Ephesians 3 describes a kind of “indwelling” of *ever-deepening fellowship*. We come to experience the presence of *Abba's* constant habitation rather than perceiving him as a fleeting Visitor. The revelation of God's love in Christ by the Spirit changes our perspective—that God is not “out there” but “in here”—IN us.

3. AFFECTION/INTIMACY

“Asking Jesus into my heart” has become an increasingly scorned phrase. If Christ is *IN us*, asking him in is redundant. But hang on—it's also a biblical phrase that describes our *affections*.

As a younger athlete, I didn't want competitors to “get into my head.” Conversely, as a husband, I definitely want to allow my wife “into my heart.”

Similarly, Paul assures the Philippians that even in chains, he carries them *IN his heart* (Philippians 1:7). That is, he remembers his fellowship with

them with joy and affection.

The same holds true of Christ. Inviting Christ IN means welcoming his intimate fellowship. Not all Christ-followers remember this. That's why Revelation 3:20 is addressed to a church. *“If anyone invites me IN, I will come IN, and dine with them and they with me.”* IN here describes our experience of active intimacy with the One who's already IN us.

4. ATTENTION/PRAYER/WORSHIP

We also carry someone IN our hearts by remembering them. In the case of Christ, we do this in prayer as we behold Christ on the throne of our hearts. We come before the throne of grace IN our hearts to pray to *Abba* and worship Christ.

“Just as Christ's identification with us takes us ‘into him,’ so our identification with Christ welcomes him ‘into us.’”

News flash: The throne in your heart is not an actual golden chair upon which Christ sits in one of your ventricles! It's a metaphor for eternal life as the internal life. It represents Christ's reign IN us and our internal loving gaze on him.

5. FULLNESS/MATURITY

Being *filled* is a related container metaphor. Paul's letters speak of being *filled with the Spirit* or attaining *the fullness of Christ*. He describes the goal of the church's 5-fold ministry:

“...to equip his people for works of service, so that the body of Christ

may be built up until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ” (Ephesians 4:12-13).

Here, the *fullness* of Christ's indwelling presence is not measured with a dipstick or expressed in terms of quantity. Fullness is a metaphor for maturity and completeness—where we are recognized as *Abba's* children by the image of his Son manifest IN our lives.

SUMMARY

All that to say, let's not get so hung up on spatial metaphors such as “IN vs. OUT” or “FAR vs. NEAR”—as if God were not omnipresent. By his Spirit, God's presence dwells in all places and fills all thing. He is the One “in

whom we live and move and have our being” (Acts 17:28).

At the same time, let's not miss the truth of these metaphors:

- As Creator, God is Father of us *all* and IN us *all*.
- As Savior, Christ has included *all* IN him by his saving work.
- Let us ALL therefore come to recognize *Abba's* love, that we might ALL receive Christ's salvation and ALL be filled with the grace of the Holy Spirit. □

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