

Being and Becoming: What Does This Mean?

by Brian L. Coatney

I can hardly think of two words more worn out by repetition than being and becoming, so I had to add something else to the title of this essay, since I might plagiarize a thousand other essays on the subject. At an earlier time of life, being posed a threat because I had dedicated myself to becoming—becoming the righteousness of God. Therefore, when I first heard that a human is a cup and not the coffee, or the vessel and not the treasure, I experienced inner wrath—a wrath that was already there, but one stirred up at the prospect of accepting that there is something that a human can never become. The religious self, even the Christian religious self, seeks to be like God, and the average Christian who turns on Christian programming or goes to many a church, finds this seeking venerated as holiness to be desired. After all, how can we fault someone who wants to be more like Christ?

However, I often encounter a scenario in Bible studies that turns me a bit mischievous; for a newcomer will start talking about how we should be like Christ, to which I will reply, “Trying to be like Christ is sin.” After the looks of shock at feared blasphemy subside, I explain that only Christ can be like himself, and that He created us to contain Him, not to try to become like Him. We learn with finality that we cannot do anything to achieve forgiveness of sins—the blood of Christ is our total efficacy on that point; but the striving to be like Him, after receiving forgiveness as a gift—that is a rampant heresy in the church, such that to refute it endangers one of the cry, “Heresy.”

The average Christian misses the connection between the angelic voice in Isaiah that says, “I will be like the most high,” and the one

who says the same thing today. If such an assertion turned Lucifer into Satan and the devil, how can such an assertion get baptized in Christian circles, such that to say the same thing is considered the mark of holiness in the Christian? What if striving to be like Christ is the same error, that error that Satan made, and in fact is Satan hiding in the Christian as a deception? This would spook the horses and empty the corral for sure; but as with the preacher who once said that his church had just experienced a great revival, only to have another preacher ask therefore how many additions he had had, to which the first preacher replied, "None, but we had some blessed subtractions,"—a good revival might initially mean the same thing today. Only it would be better to empty ourselves and not the churches, but we can empty the churches first if God intends that.

Jesus said that He is the vine and we are the branches, and that apart from Him we can do nothing; in fact, he said that a branch dries up and is good only for the fire if it does not abide in him. Somehow that gets distorted to mean still that God helps us or gives us love, or patience, or whatever—as if He gives us a quality that we then are endowed with as good Christians. One might then look like a general in the army with a chest full of medals.

But what if we study the vine-branch analogy a little more from a point of view other than the "trying to become" point of view. First, we observe that a branch is exactly like the vine because it grows out of the vine and is one with the vine: it never was anything other than a branch and can only ever be a branch unless it gets cut off. Second, the branch will never be the vine, though the vine can be fairly said to be the branch: if the branch gets cut off, the vine is still the vine.

This correlates to the point in systematic theology that God is self sufficient within the trinity and not dependent on the creation in any way to preserve the ontology of deity. Whether God creates man or not, God is still fully God in His nature and essence. But then we come to the issue that God wants to be man, and so expresses Himself as man; but man cannot become God in His sovereignty. At most we can only be limited editions of God in the particular. Apart from the particular, God remains God; we do not add to Him by

existing, but we do expand His manifestation and give Him the pleasure of a family made in His image. So He becomes we, but we never become He: His transcendence remains inscrutable as Paul tells us at the end of Romans Chapter Eleven.

Third (about branches) they abide naturally and at ease, without the dilemma of whether to be attached one day and not another. An on again off again proposition would pose a horticultural nightmare; but Christians feel quite free to posit such a meaning for Jesus exhortation to abide. What if Jesus meant, "Get there, stay there, and relax." This offends the "trying to become" mentality because what would one do if there were nothing to do? How horrible—to have nothing to do, or seemingly so?

Mankind loves nothing better than to build things, and what could be greater as a project than to find a way to attach the Christian to Christ and schedule a program of maintenance to stay attached? This is the worker's dream—to build something and then keep it in fit fashion. But just as God has gotten through to the average Christian that it is an affront to Him to add anything to the blood of Jesus for the forgiveness of sins, we need to let God get through to us that it is equally an affront to Him to try to attain a righteousness by anything we do.

I hear the screams already. "Do nothing?" That's right. If Paul (Who really reads him?) says anything in his epistles, he says, by revelation, that righteousness is a gift. I started to say that it is a gift that we receive by faith, and Paul does say that repetitively as well, but I feared lest a reader might miss the shock and savor of the one word GIFT. Righteousness is a gift; moreover righteousness is a person—the person of God.

It shocked me once when a seminar participant questioned my use of the term person to describe God: this person said, "We are persons; God is not a person." Isn't that backwards? God is spirit, and as such He desires, wills, and knows. Therefore, to be created in His image means that we operate the same faculties that He does, ideally joined to Him as a branch is joined to a vine.

But if we are created in His image, and He created us to be branches of His vine, why is it that we do not know that and live therefore spontaneously—like the spontaneity of Nature? Genesis tells us the story of the Fall, but also implies far more than an act of disobedience; we were made sinners. Since we were created as cups and vessels and branches, we remained those very things even after the Fall: we did not change in constitution. But a terrible deception quietly hid itself away in us at the very moment of the Fall: Satan came to live in the cup, Satan came to live in the vessel, and Satan became the false vine to us, to which we were attached as branches until conversion to Jesus Christ through his death, burial, and resurrection.

Christ became us, the first Adam, in His death, so that His death became our death too. He was made to be sin: in other words, He became Satan indwelled humanity, so that in His death, sin went out of His body and therefore out of ours since we were in Him. But a dead body, though dead to sin, is equally dead to righteousness. Therefore, He had to rise and we in Him, by the Spirit. So the essence of the body death of Christ is this: Christ died as a Satan-I and rose as a Spirit-I, and we in Him.

Why does Satan hide his former indwelling from us? It would seem to be his greatest glory to boast of this to us and parade it before all of earth and heaven. But think of how terrifying such a revelation as this is; and think of how many would run immediately to Jesus Christ if they really believed this. So the devil had to hide his would-be glory and satisfy himself only with infecting us in every pore, with the lie that we are just ourselves—yes, independent selves.

I had this view of myself, namely that I was independent, for a long time, even as a Christian—one who knew that God had forgiven my sins. I certainly did not want *anyone*, however, managing my life. Yet when we look at Romans Chapter Six, Paul says that we are always a slave of either sin or righteousness; we never achieve freedom of such a kind that detaches itself from a vine and lives on its own.

This is the error of many mystical movements today: they deceive the practitioner into thinking that the self can become a god—

perhaps even a god that can spawn, like a salmon hatch, and produce a new world where he or she as god will rule. Who wants to be a slave forever? Well, I do because I have learned that to be a slave of God in contentment is to become a friend of God; and finally, it is a relief not to have to be God, but to let God be God in me and produce His life in me.

This ends the quest to be, for it puts an end to the law: for law keeps a person enslaved in trying to become what God offers as a gift. So in order to truly come to God, one must not only accept that the blood of Jesus is the only provision for the forgiveness of sins; one must also accept that God is the only provision of life, and not in a way that He transfers it to us as a property of the human self. No, the human self, even in its glorified state, is forever the receiver. We know ourselves when we fall in love with receiving: God created us to be receivers and forever be in love with receiving His life in some way.

Why doesn't everyone discover the deception that Satan has duped us into not knowing that we are cups, vessels, and branches? Not everyone really wants to know this; and this introduces the agony of why God is God of a universe in which there is a devil and also the agony of why God created a universe in which unbelieving human beings will end up with the devil in the lake of fire. "God, how can your universe be perfect if You create a freedom that can genuinely choose to refuse slavery to You?"

Here is where I do two things: first, I accept that I am not in charge and do not therefore, argue with God about His universe. Job tried that and failed; I tried that and failed; if you try that, you will fail; second, I act for my own preservation, meaning that I am not going to throw away my own salvation, which I desire, just because others reject the salvation offered to them.

By this I mean that faith is based on four things: first, a thing is available; second, a thing is desirable to me; third, I take it; and fourth, what I take takes me. I am not responsible for whether others desire what is available; as a good steward, I only proclaim and admonish others toward what is available. The deception that we can control other's choices dies hard in us: the alone walk with

God is the most terrible height we ascend; for at that height we do not look for approval from others, but throw democracy away; and in this new realm we live existentially unto God alone: for not to do this means that we still worship humanity (implying our own still in some way)—for some other human must approve of where we stand with God instead of God alone.

This is why I do not use the term relationship toward other human beings; for it connotes something sticky, with attachments—the very attachments to others and myself that Jesus died on a Cross to sever so that we could live unto God alone. I do say that I have fellowship with other human beings as the byproduct of the one relationship in my life—that with God. This was very costly to discover, but the entanglements and manipulations necessary to satisfy others fortunately produced enough insanity and bondage in me that I came to see the devil's game in me and let it go for the pure management of the Spirit: for where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is liberty.

Now I come to becoming in a new way, no longer that of becoming like Christ; but now as a new creature—Christ as me—I do become infinitely and eternally: I will eternally be becoming who I already am as this new being. The particulars of my life and yours in Christ will forever expand and vary with distinction, both toward God and toward each other.

When I saw the new and true becoming, I saw that it has nothing to do with becoming righteous, but has everything to do with life in the Spirit, paralleled by analogy to growth in the daily, human domain. A parent loves its baby; the parent savors and enjoys each aspect of the new baby in the family—each aspect of preteen years, each new discovery of talent and manifestation of the self, and each advancement in learning and development along the way. Distinction of person-hood allows for the giving and receiving of love. So why would the original Father, the God of the universe, conceive a plan in which we do not give and receive love with Him?

But I can hear already the cry of "Separation! This is not union." Consider that Jesus himself communed with His father; and then recall that the scripture says that we are His body now—we are the

body of Christ, and as such we inherit all that He is relationally to the distinct members of the Godhead; and since we are derivative beings and not Elohim ourselves, we get to experience forever our expanding as Him in the infinite.

This challenge frustrated me during the time of life when I had to arrive and not discover or experience anything else: "Get me there, and make that final." But once I got there, I discovered that there will always be new manifestations and gifts of the Spirit, and the journey as a distinct son means ever more particulars. We cannot know a universal except by particulars, and we are those particulars. So the surprise of God is more surprises, not as to righteousness, but as to the manifestation of righteousness.

That is why to arrive means to always be becoming—not a movement toward union, but the eternal movement and expansion within union. Differentiation here takes on endless variation of color, sound, and entity. Wisdom becomes our teacher, and instead of asking, "How is this done?" we say, "How do I respond in this particular moment?" Generalities and principles dissolve into the genius of the Holy Spirit by us in a given moment.

Otherwise, we deteriorate into creeds, and creeds serve us up to a point, but then, if we still live with a bit of deception, we look to a creed instead of Christ who is the living God: we try foolishly to arrange our present knowledge of the particulars into a predictability that becomes boring and without the passion that truly is God.

Now some things will never change: God became a man in Christ Jesus and died for our sins; He arose on the third day, and He will separate the wheat from the chaff at the end of the age. Wisdom decrees that we preach these truths. But Christianity is not historical facts apart from them occurring as actual history in us. A history apart from us does not save us; but as we by faith internalize the death, burial, and resurrection of Christ, we come to say, "I am crucified with Christ," and we see in his burial and resurrection our own in Him. History shrinks, and we simplify our viewpoint to one of two Adams, the one stolen by Satan or the one Christ is and that swallows up the old Adam by the Cross.

Am I becoming? If by that one means becoming righteous so as to be someday like Christ, no; I gave up that sin when I recognized it as the devil's domain. Am I becoming? If by that, one means enjoying a relationship with God in which I experience a multiplicity of gifts and manifestations, both within myself, and with my fellow believers, you bet I am. Now that I don't have to be God, God can be me; and He can be you; and that can move with great change toward the infinite, without frustration.