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Christian Assurance and Crippling Introspection

Rev. Jared Moore, Pastor
New Salem Baptist Church, Hustonville, Kentucky¹

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Introduction

The relation between a Christian’s divine assurance of final salvation and crippling introspection (human responsibility) has been debated for over fifteen hundred years within the church.² The debate still rages onward within contemporary evangelicalism. Due to the limits of time and space, this writer admits presupposing a

¹ See his bio and blog at <http://jaredmoore.exaltchrist.com>. He is Th.M. Candidate, Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, Louisville, Kentucky; www.SWBTS.edu.

² See Arthur S. Yates, *The Doctrine of Assurance with Special Reference to John Wesley* (London, UK: Epworth, 1952); R. T. Kendall, *Calvin and English Calvinism to 1649* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 1979); Joel R. Beeke, “Personal Assurance of Faith: English Puritanism and the Dutch ‘Nadere Reformatie’: From Westminster to Alexander Comrie (1640-1760)” (Ph.D. dissertation, Westminster Theological Seminary, CA, 1988); and John Jefferson Davis, “The Perseverance of the Saints: A History of the Doctrine,” *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 34, no. 2 (June 1991): 213-228, for a brief examination of the history of the perseverance of the saints since Augustine. The doctrine of the perseverance of the saints is an *assuring* doctrine; for God will surely finish what He started in the initial saving work of His children. Davis examines the doctrine of perseverance in Augustine, Thomas Aquinas, Martin Luther, John Calvin, the Council of Trent, the Anglican Creeds, James Arminius, The Synod of Dort, the Westminster Assembly, John Wesley, Baptist Confessions in America, Dispensational Interpretation, and in recent scholarship. This essay is worthy of its reader’s time due to its excellent use of many primary sources and its bearing on divine assurance and crippling introspection.

compatibilist perspective concerning God's sovereignty and man's responsibility.³ This belief is deduced from the understanding that all the Scripture writers in the Protestant Bible were compatibilists.⁴ Therefore, with compatibilism in mind, one must understand that divine assurance and crippling introspection both have their places in

³ See D.A. Carson, "Reflections on Assurance," in *Still Sovereign: Contemporary Perspectives on Election, Foreknowledge, and Grace*, eds. Thomas R. Schreiner and Bruce A. Ware, (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2000), 269. Carson defines compatibilism as, "the view that the following two statements are, despite superficial evidence to the contrary, mutually compatible: God is absolutely sovereign but his sovereignty does not in any way mitigate human responsibility; human beings are responsible creatures (i.e., they choose, decide, obey, disobey, believe, rebel, and so forth), but their responsibility never serves to make God absolutely contingent."

⁴ *Ibid.*, 269-270. Concerning all Scripture writers being compatibilists, Carson writes, "When Joseph responds to his brothers' alarm by saying that when they sold him to the Midianites they meant it for evil, while God meant it for good (Gen. 50:19-20), the thinking is compatibilistic. Joseph does not say that God had initiated a lovely plan to send Joseph down to Egypt by first-class chariot, but the brothers corrupted the plan by their evil machinations. Nor does he say that the brothers hatched an evil plot, but God rushed in to the rescue by turning their evil into good (though some passages portray God in precisely such categories). Rather, in one and the same event, God and the brothers were working, the one with good intent, the others with evil intent. God's sovereign, unseen sway does not mitigate the brothers' evil; their malice does not catch God by surprise and make him utterly contingent.

In the same way, the Assyrians can be described as mere tools in Yahweh's hands as he disciplines his people (Isa. 10:5ff.). But that does not reduce their responsibility. In their foolish pride they think they are achieving these military victories on their own. Therefore God will hold them accountable for their arrogance, and, after using them the way a workman wields a saw or an axe, will turn again to rend them.

When the Philippians are told to work out their own salvation with fear and trembling, on the ground that it is God who is working in them both to will and to act according to his good purpose, it is important to observe what is not said. The Philippians are not told to work out their salvation since God has done his bit and now it is their turn; nor are they told that they should simply "let go and let God," since after all salvation is all of grace. Rather, they are encouraged to work out their salvation precisely because it is God who is at work in them, both at the level of their wills and at the level of their actions. God's sovereignty functions as an incentive to work, not a disincentive. Similarly, when in a night vision the Lord encourages Paul to preach on in Corinth (Acts 18:9-10), the ground is that the Lord has many people in this place. In other words, election here functions as an incentive to evangelism, not a disincentive.

Nowhere, perhaps, are such compatibilistic tendencies more starkly presupposed than in Acts 4, when the church turns to prayer after the first whiff of persecution. The Christians invoke the "Sovereign Lord" who made the heaven and earth, and cite Psalm 2 as they remember that all the rage and plotting of the nations against the Lord and against his anointed One are futile: the Lord will have them in derision. Small wonder these believers saw the deepest fulfillment of Psalm 2 in the death of their Master: "Indeed Herod and Pontius Pilate met together with the Gentiles and the people of Israel in this city to conspire against your holy servant Jesus, whom you anointed" (4:27). Then they add, "They did what your power and will had decided beforehand should happen" (4:28).

A moment's reflection discloses that anything other than a compatibilist approach to these events destroys the gospel itself. Christians cannot possibly believe that the cross began as a nasty conspiracy by wicked politicians, with God riding in on a white charger at the last moment to turn their evil into good: that would mean that the plan of redemption was not a plan after all. Nor can they believe that God's sovereign control of the events excused all the human players: if Herod, Judas, Pontius Pilate, and other leaders were not involved in a conspiracy of which they were wretchedly culpable, it is hard to imagine how any human being in God's world could be thought culpable of anything—and in that case, why offer an atoning sacrifice for actions for which there could be no guilt?"

the Christian life because true assurance is Trinitarianly divine and is supported by a *brief* crippling introspection.⁵

A. Christian Assurance Is Trinitarianly Divine

True assurance of salvation in the Christian life is divine in that its source is *entirely* divine. Salvation and assurance, everything that is bound up in human regeneration, sanctification, etc., is a result of God's plan flowing from His *essential* attributes. Which attributes however are the source of this plan and ultimate Christian assurance? One could easily answer that God is the source, but this is *not* a very detailed or nuanced explanation; for ultimately, God is the source and end of all things. For from him and through him and to him are all things (Rom. 11:36a) (ESV). Specifically, the desired question that needs an answer is "Which attribute(s) of God are *ultimately* responsible for the Christian's assurance of salvation?" Grace and mercy probably come to reader's mind immediately; however, these attributes are *not* ultimate, but are contingent.

True assurance is impossible for a believer to ascertain apart from a gracious God, or so Augustine would say.⁶ Bruce Ware agrees, but argues,

Again, it seems that creation, and particularly the entrance of sin into the creation, calls forth qualities of God that are expressions of eternal and essential qualities but that are themselves also contingent and conditional qualities occasioned by the world to which God is now related. For example, shall we think of God as eternally merciful? In the Trinity, apart from creation, to whom is God merciful? If mercy is favor shown to one who is destitute, needy, helpless, and hopeless, how can mercy be expressed within the Trinity? The same can be said of grace and wrath. It seems that these are qualities that express God's essential attributes of love and holiness, respectively, but they are

⁵ Ibid., 275f. Carson argues that any comprehensive treatment of the doctrine of divine assurance should follow a three-fold pattern: "I should point out that in many classic treatments on assurance there is a threefold focus: the objective work of Christ grounded in the plan of God, the demonstrable transformation of the believer that is the new birth's inevitable result, and the inner witness of the Spirit... All three legs must be set out in biblical array and pastorally wise proportion in any comprehensive treatment of assurance." Although this article is not a *comprehensive* treatment of the doctrine of divine assurance, it will seek to carry out Church History's and Carson's germ idea of a three-fold pattern in examining the doctrine: God's work in Christ, man's introspection of his own good works, and the Spirit's inward testimony.

⁶ St. Augustine and Roland J. Teske, *Answer to the Pelagians IV: Works of Saint Augustine*, (Hyde Park, NY: New City Press, 1999), 121.

conditioned by God's relationship with a sinful world, and hence come to be in time and are, therefore, contingent.⁷

Going further than Augustine, Ware purports that grace is *not* ultimate because it *cannot* be due to it possessing a beginning, a moment in time when it *began* to exist. Thus, Augustine stops short in Ware's mind, and this writer agrees.

True assurance does indeed rise and fall on God's grace, but this grace is an *expression* of God's essential attributes: love and holiness; not His accidental properties: i.e. grace and mercy. Grace therefore does *not* rise and fall on its own, for it is *not* an expression of itself; but is rather an expression of God's essential love and holiness. These attributes exist *before* time, and are *not* contingent upon anyone or anything. Before the foundation of the world, the Triune God perfectly loved Himself in holiness. Grace however is contingent upon the existence of an object that needs it; and is also contingent upon God choosing to show unmerited favor to this object. Apart from the object's need, and God's divine choice, God's grace does *not* exist. It is not a necessary attribute of God; for it has not always flowed from God's nature. God was still entirely God during the points within time or before time that He was not gracious or merciful.⁸

Due to God's grace not existing at one point in time, one must ask *when* this grace came into being. One must also ponder if this grace came in stages, for God's *effectual* saving grace is *experientially* unknown to all creation except humanity. Much evil however took place *before* man fell into sin: Satan rebelled, a third of the angels fell with him, and all the rebels were kicked out of heaven (Ezek. 28:15-19; Jude 6; Rev. 12:4).⁹ God's common grace however began flowing from His love and holiness the moment Lucifer rebelled. Otherwise, God would have justly condemned Satan and his

⁷ Bruce Ware, *God's Greater Glory: The Exalted God of Scripture and the Christian Faith*, (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2004), 29.

⁸ See J. Wesley Richards, *The Untamed God: A Philosophical Exploration of Divine Perfection, Simplicity, and Immutability*, (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2003), 64. Richards argues that God's essential properties are the properties God has in every possible world. On the other hand, God's accidental properties are those properties that would be different depending on what type of world God created.

⁹ Joel Beeke, *Striving Against Satan: Knowing the Enemy—His Weakness, His Strategy, His Defeat*, (Wales, UK: Bryntirion Press, 2006), 17-18.

demons to hell *immediately*.¹⁰ God however showed His *common* grace even in allowing Satan and his demons to live, roaming too and fro on the earth. God's effectual saving grace however did *not* begin until the fall of mankind into sin and corruption.

Man's corruption and sinful fall made it impossible for his assurance of salvation to come from within himself. How can a sinful man judge his own heart; for the heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately sick; who can understand it (Jer. 17:9)? The answer is obviously that he cannot, although he may desperately desire to do so. Due to his depraved condition, man's assurance must necessarily come from outside himself, from the finished work of Christ alone.¹¹

The Scriptures affirm this necessary Source as well. Christ is the theme of the Scriptures; and should thus be the theme of all theology as well, for it is through Christ that God's immanence is ultimately revealed. Christ's coming is a result of God's plan of redemption flowing from His holiness and love. In John's Gospel, Christ is referred to as the Word, the communication of God (John 1:1). He is also ascribed the title(s) Son of God and/or Lord by every New Testament author. Furthermore, Christ is prophesied as Immanuel (God with us) in Isaiah 7:14; and is argued as the fulfillment of this

¹⁰ This statement of course assumes that God entered time and space when He created; and that although He exists outside of time as well (this is heavily debated today), He still experiences moment by moment with His creation. Concerning this phenomenon Bruce Ware writes, "The classical view, that God had only a relation of reason with the world, entails that God in no sense is affected by His relationship with finite creatures. God does not literally feel compassion, nor is He literally angry or sorrowful or delighted. His simplicity, timelessness and absolute immutability preclude this possibility. But is this the God of the Bible? Is not God everywhere said to have entered our time and engaged in relationships with His human creation? The openness view is right to insist on the reality of God's personal relatedness with the world, and so affirm His real involvement in the temporal and changing conditions of human affairs." Bruce Ware, "On Opening What's Closed And Closing What's Open: Rethinking The Doctrine of God In Light of The Openness Proposal," (Evangelical Theological Society, 47th National Conference, Philadelphia, PA, November 16-18, 1995), Theological Research Exchange Network, ETS-4782, 3-4. It must be noted here as well that if God exists within time *and* outside of time that His contingent attributes forever exist outside of time; and are only contingent as He relates to His creation inside of time. Thus, if there is no divine temporality outside of time, and God experiences everything in the "present" outside of time, then His attributes that are contingent in time are not contingent outside of time. This writer's article however only details God's relation to His creation inside of time. Concerning whether or not God relates to His creation outside of time in a similar manner that He does inside of time, this writer does not know, but he can only assume that God does since the Scriptures appear to know no such distinction between God's relation to His creation whether inside of time or outside of it.

¹¹ See Christopher David Bass, "The Nature of the Believer's Assurance of Eternal Life in 1 John" (Ph.D. diss., Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, 2006): 66-118; for an excellent defense of the believer's assurance resting in Christ's finished work alone. Bass especially examines 1 John; but, he also cross-references many other verses throughout the Protestant Bible.

prophecy in Matthew 1:23. Jesus is also the fulfillment of the entire Old Testament (Luke 24:27; Acts 3:24, 10:43, 13:27-30).¹² His incarnation and finished work are indeed expressions of God's grace, for He is the ultimate fulfillment of God being with His people. In the incarnation, God the Son became Man without ceasing to be God, so that He could sympathize with humanity and eventually propitiate His Father's wrath on the cross (Phil. 2:5-11; Heb. 2:17-18; 1 John 4:10). Because of all that Christ has accomplished, the assurance of the believer rests in Him.

God and Jesus however are not alone in Their work. God the Holy Spirit flows eternally from God the Father and God the Son (Rom. 8:9). He is the One that God and Christ have sent into the hearts of believers that causes them to cry out "Abba! Father (Gal. 4:6)!" He is with believers forever, helping and/or comforting them (John 14:16).¹³ This new birth of the believer is brought about through the washing of the "water" of the Word and the power of God the Holy Spirit (John 3:5, 8; Ezek. 36:24-37; Titus 3:5).¹⁴ Christ therefore in sharing the gospel with Nicodemus communicates that God the Holy Spirit is the source of regeneration, of divine life.¹⁵ Furthermore, the Holy Spirit provides assurance to believers through literally transforming sinners into saints instantaneously (Eph. 1:13), progressively (1 John 3:24), and finally (Eph. 4:30). He also provides assurance to believers through His inward testimony (Rom. 8:16). This inward testimony is admittedly a peculiar supernatural knowledge that each believer possesses where God the Holy Spirit

¹² Ibid., 119-144, for a defense of Christ's historic redemptive work being another source for Divine assurance. Because Christ is the fulfillment of all of Scripture, one can trust that God through Christ will fulfill all His New Testament promises as well: i.e. the personal and corporate salvation of His people.

¹³ It must be noted here that scholars basically do not know what *parakletos* means (John 14:16). There simply is not one English word that can capture the complexities of this title. To summarize, this writer affirms that the best rendering of defining the term "*parakletos*" is in examining the person and work of Christ, using Him as the foundation, and then arguing for God the Holy Spirit continuing His ministry. He is after all "*another parakletos*." See Glen Nielson, "The Work of the Holy Spirit in Light of John 14-16" (S.Th.M. Thesis, Concordia Seminary, May 1987), Theological Research Exchange Network, 020-0028, 21, for a brief but detailed examination of *parakletos*' usage within the Gospel of John, the various theories purported to define its meaning, and a well argued suggested interpretation. See pages 20-126; and especially pages 20-34.

¹⁴ Andreas J. Kostenberger, *Encountering John*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1999), 84-85.

¹⁵ Dwight Hunt, "Jesus' Teaching Concerning the Paraclete in the Upper Room Discourse," (Th.M. Thesis, Western Conservative Baptist Seminary, April 1981) Theological Research Exchange Network, 002-0081, 16.

communicates with the believer's spirit, affirming his salvation in Christ.

B. True Assurance is Supported by a Brief Crippling Introspection.

The source of Christian salvation being ultimately in a *holy* Triune God causes Christians to be assured of their salvation, but it also causes them to question their salvation as they peer within and without; for they admittedly fall short of God's glory on a consistent basis.¹⁶ This peering is not wicked or evil, for Scripture commands all believers to examine their own hearts: introspection. For example, the apostle Peter tells his Christian readers to make their calling and election sure (2 Pet. 1:10). The apostle Paul in like manner tells his readers to work out their own salvation with fear and trembling (Phil. 2:12). The apostle John as well tells his readers specific outward actions that Christians will exhibit so that they will *know* that they possess Christ; and that Christ possesses them.¹⁷

Even though the believer's righteous thoughts, actions, and desires are vital for assurance, they *cannot* be the ground of the believer's assurance. Introspection therefore must necessarily only

¹⁶ See Tom Wells, "The Holiness of God and Assurance That I Am a Christian," *Reformation & Revival: A Quarterly Journal for Church Leadership* 4, no. 2 (Spring 1995): 63-64. Wells writes, "In this article we will narrowly confine ourselves to a single observation about God's holiness: God's holiness demands a corresponding holiness and righteousness in us. God Himself has plainly commanded: "I am the Lord your God. Consecrate yourselves therefore, and be holy; for I am holy" (Lev. 11:44). This, of course, was spoken to His ancient people, Israel, but when we turn to the New Testament we hear it repeated to the church of Jesus Christ: As obedient children, do not be conformed to the former lusts which were yours in your ignorance, but like the Holy One who called you, be holy yourselves also in all your behavior; because it is written, "You shall be Holy, for I am Holy" (1 Peter 1:14-16). In other words, we are to be like God. We are to be like God in our moral character. Nor is this pious advice to be taken or left aside as the moment dictates. This is basic to the entire Christian life. If we are not holy we will never "see the Lord" (Heb. 12:14). In the baldest of terms, "It is holiness or hell." But I find all this quite intolerable. It is not that it causes me intellectual problems as though it were somehow irrational for God to call on me to be holy. The command itself makes sense, but I have a problem of another kind. I am unholy, and try as I may I cannot convince myself that I shall ever measure up to this simple standard"-the holiness of God. Certainly I fall far short just now. How then can I be a Christian? I have examined myself to see whether I am in the faith (as 1 Corinthians 13:5 exhorts me) and I find that I can give no certain answer. I have sought to take seriously Peter's command to make my calling and election sure (2 Peter 1:10), but doubt, based on uncertainty about the worthiness of my walk, dogs my footsteps and nudges me toward despair. I repeat, this time with still further apprehension: "How then can I be a Christian?"

¹⁷ See John R. W. Stott, *The Letters of John: An Introduction and Commentary*, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries, rev. ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2000), 56; for a brief argument that the entire letter of 1 John was written to communicate the certainty of salvation a Christian may possess while on earth.

support the believer's assurance by testifying of the work the Trinity has wrought in the believer. Speaking of the ground of assurance in light of 1 John, Christopher David Bass writes,

Therefore, the thesis of this dissertation is that the letter of 1 John teaches that assurance of eternal life is *fundamentally grounded* in the work of Christ and supported in a vital, yet subsidiary way, by the lifestyle of the believer. One's lifestyle is "vital" in that if a person fails to keep the commands, love the brethren, and have a right confession of Jesus, he demonstrates that he was never a child of God and should have any false assurance eradicated.¹⁸

Bass rightly argues that good works do not make a good man in God's eyes, but a good man will have good works. Good works do not justify, but they do reveal whether or not a sinner has been justified by God. Christians therefore should never seek to approach God based on any good works that they have or have not accomplished; for, if Christians look to Christ alone, it is *impossible* for them to doubt their salvation. If doubt ever exists in the Christian's life, it is never a result of consistently looking to Christ alone for salvation. What is the answer for the Christian that doubts his salvation? Tom Wells has the answer:

When we come to God, we must bring nothing but Christ with us. Any ingredients, or any previous qualifications of our own, will poison and corrupt faith. He who builds upon duties, graces, etc., knows not the merits of Christ. Despairing sinner! Look at Christ now; look to Him and be saved, all the ends of the earth (Isa. 45:22). There is none else. He is the Savior, and there is no other besides Him (v. 21). Look anywhere else and you are undone. God will look at nothing but Christ and you must look at nothing else. This is the way to clear the fog of doubt and come into the sunshine of God's peace.¹⁹

If the Christian's introspection is *continually* crippling, then it is either because he is looking in the mirror for salvation, looking to some other false god, or he is not a Christian. Regardless the problem, the answer is still the same: look to Christ alone despairing sinner!

For Christians, peering within is a daunting task, for it reveals the wickedness of the heart. This writer is weekly, if not daily, crushed under the Law of God. Due to introspection, this writer finds himself *crippled* on a regular basis; however, this writer also finds himself

¹⁸ Bass, "The Nature of the Believer's Assurance of Eternal Life in 1 John," 4.

¹⁹ Wells, "The Holiness of God and Assurance That I Am a Christian," 68.

rescued by the grace of God *before* he can sink into deep depression. This crippling introspection is itself a mark of a true believer, for the self-examiner admits that he is in constant need of the finished work of Christ appropriated to his account. Admittedly, while sin is present with Christians on earth, introspection causes an inward *sorrowful* weeping that is quickly turned into *joyful* weeping the moment the believer again consciously looks to Christ. Thus, although introspection is necessarily crippling because of the presence of sin, it is brief.

Furthermore, every believer also struggles with what he or she knows to be true (divine assurance) and what he or she experiences (an admission of the wickedness that is ever-present with Christians while they physically live in sinful creation). In this writer's own experience, he is consistently condemned by his "missing of the mark," only to be rescued by the finished work of Christ. As he worships on the Lord's Day, he finds himself condemned by the truth in the songs, the liturgy, the prayers, the Scripture reading, etc., only to be rescued by the same truth that is also present within these elements: Christ lived, died, and rose again to justify sinners before His Father; of which I am one!

Finally, introspection may be biblical or unbiblical, depending on the believer's use of this divine tool. Unbiblical introspection occurs whenever believers base their assurance on their own thoughts, actions, etc., instead of based on the ground of Christ's finished work. Biblical introspection on the other hand takes place whenever a believer looks to his outward and inward thoughts and actions to see if God is working in him (Phil. 2:12-13). A believer looking into himself must yield fruit of the "not yet" mingled with fruit of the "already"; thus, a look at one's own thoughts, feelings, and actions, a look at one's own heart, both condemns a believer while *revealing* his justification by God as well.²⁰ A person that professes faith in Christ,

²⁰ See Juan R. Sanchez, Jr., "The Old Man Vs. The New Man in the Doctrine of Sanctification: A Critique of the Two Nature Theory," (Th.M. Thesis, Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, 2002): 8. Sanchez argues, "As citizens of the age to come, believers "already" enjoy the benefits of freedom from the power of sin (Rom. 6/ Col. 3); however, since the age to come has not been fully consummated, we are "not yet" totally free from the presence of sin (Eph. 4)." This writer agrees. Furthermore, see Sanchez's thesis for an excellent argument against the common evangelical two-nature theory: the old nature vs. the new nature. Sanchez instead argues that Christians are caught between "two eschatological eras which speak of the believer's redemptive-historical identity; the old man signifies our identity with [Footnote continued on next page ...]

still has wickedness, evil, etc. that is present with him (living in the not yet); but, he also has been transformed by God the Holy Spirit due to His initial and continual indwelling presence within him (living in the already). The marks of redemption are present simultaneously with the marks of death as the believer struggles to live between the two ages: the “already” and the “not yet.” This reality is revealed throughout the Scriptures, for the prophets, Israel, apostles, New Testament church, etc. are all painted in the same light: free from the power of sin, but living in sin’s presence.

Conclusion

In conclusion, all of the aforementioned realities concerning assurance ultimately flow from God the Father, are revealed in God the Son, and are appropriated by God the Holy Spirit. Hence, Christian assurance is Trinitarianly divine in nature. Introspection however plays an important crippling aspect in the believer’s salvation; for it reveals his inability to save himself while simultaneously sending him running to the cross for all that he needs for eternal salvation. Thus, being divinely assured of salvation is healthy; but, so is being briefly crippled by introspection, for the believer is living in the age of the “not yet.” Although all Christians have “already” been freed from the power of sin, they have “yet” to be freed from the presence of sin. As a result, the tension between the believer’s divine assurance and his crippling introspection will remain until he goes to be with the Lord; or, Christ returns to get him.



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Adam in the old era, thus being “in Adam,” while the new man indicates our identity with Christ in the new era, thus being “in Christ.”
