



## Is the Old Man Dead?

There are several verses in Paul's letters which refer to the 'old man' (Rom. 6:6; Eph. 4:22; Col. 3:9). Over the years there has been some controversy as to who exactly the 'old man' is, and whether he is dead or alive – or both! In Scottish theology it was perhaps James Fraser of Alness (1700-1769) in his *The Scripture Doctrine of Sanctification* who gave special impetus to the notion that the 'old man' is alive and co-exists with the 'new man' in the Christian. To some this view was essential to understanding the experience of the believer. To Fraser the 'old man' signified the corruption of our nature, the principle of sin, '*so far as it remains in the true Christian*'. '*In him, and in him only*', says Fraser, '*the former is the old man*'. For the unregenerate, in Fraser's understanding, '*this evil principle*' is not the old man '*but continues young, in full strength and vigour*'. Fraser paraphrases the passage in Romans 6 thus: '*we have still our old man*', thus making his position perfectly clear. This view was not of course new and it has had its advocates ever since, notably in the Scottish Highlands, and among the Christian Brethren. The question posed in this article is this: '*Is the old man alive in the Christian?*' There are those like James Fraser who say, Yes! Apart from their particular understanding of the passages mentioned, the point is usually made that it is true to the Christian's experience. But is the interpretation sound? It should be noted that the question is not, 'Is the 'new man' in Christ perfect?' For it is clear from Scripture that that is not the case (see for example Galatians 3:3; 1 John 1:8-10, etc.). Nor is it disputed that the believer is still 'in the flesh' and so requires to mortify sin (see Romans 8:13; Colossians 3:5, etc.). These things are undoubtedly true. However, the question is, 'Does Paul teach that the old man (whatever he means by that) is still alive in the believer?' Or should these passages rather be understood as teaching that the old man is indeed dead in the believer? We require to look closely at the passages in Paul's letters which raise this matter: Romans 6:6, Ephesians 4:22-24 and Colossians 3:9-10.

### **Romans 6:6**

In Romans 6 there is a contrast between the new and the old. Believers are said to walk in '*newness of life*' (v 4), whereas the '*old man*' is '*crucified with Christ*' (v 6). This has often been taken to reflect a contrast within the believer, so that when he sins he acts in terms of the old man, and when he does well he acts in terms of the new. This explains, it is said, the conflict between flesh and spirit and sin and holiness in the believer. Is that what Paul means? He actually says this (literally): '*That our old man was crucified with him*'. The Authorised Version translates the Greek word in the present tense – 'is crucified with him'. However, in Greek grammar it is what is called an aorist passive, indicating something that has been completed in the past, and should be translated 'was crucified'. So Paul is indicating that the 'old man' was in fact put to death decisively in the past. When? When they were 'crucified in Christ' (v 6). The point may be made that one cannot be crucified and alive at the same time. The term, comments John Murray, '*is epexegetical* (of the same sort of understanding) *of other expressions, such as "we died to sin", "we have been planted together in the likeness of his death", "we died with Christ"*' (Romans 6:2, 5, 8). In addition to this the parallel truth of the resurrection of Christ, and believers in Him (as indicated in verses 9 to 11) surely excludes the notion that the 'old man' is alive. The resurrected Lord, after all, is not in any 'process' of resurrection. And so those raised in Him cannot surely be thought of as being in the 'process' of being raised in Him. They are to reckon themselves dead to sin but alive to God (v 11). It is the 'new man' who is raised up in Christ, and it is newness of resurrection life that Paul is emphasising here in the context (v 4). On this verse, then, the 'old man' must be the unregenerate, unconverted, unsaved person, or, in other words, the believer in his former state under sin. It is precisely that state which is put to death in principle in the believer at conversion. That is the

explanation for the reference to baptism in the context of verses 3 and 4. It is because this 'old man' is dead in the believer that Paul can give the exhortation: *'let not sin therefore reign in your mortal body, that ye should obey it in the lusts thereof'* (Romans 6:12).

### **Colossians 3:9-10**

In Colossians 3 Paul exhorts his Christian readers to desist from certain sins (verses 5 to 8). These sins are certainly characteristic of the 'old man'. But the reason he gives for desisting from these sins is that after all they have put off the old man and put on the new! He has already told them that they were already dead. The Greek word means, literally, 'ye died'. Now their life is hidden in Christ (verse 3). In verses 9 and 10 Paul uses two important words. In verse 9 there is a word which means 'having put off'. In verse 10 the word means 'having put on'. These point, grammatically, to completed action in the past. The idea of 'putting off' and 'putting on' is hardly consistent with the notion that what has been put off – the old – and what has been subsequently put on – the new. Can both be present at the same time? Surely not! So, here in Colossians, too, the 'old man' has been definitely put off by believers, and they are now clothed with the new man (verses 12 to 17). As Herbert Carson expressed it: *'The believer ... has ceased to be what he once was. As a new creature in Christ he can never be the same. Hence the practices which were normal to him in his unregenerate state are now completely unnatural'*. At the same time of course he is still in the body and therefore has to contend with the flesh, in terms of continuing indwelling sin. But he is not the 'old man' (in Adam), but the 'new man' (in Christ).

### **Ephesians 4:22-24**

At first sight Ephesians 4 appears to contradict the way we have interpreted the Romans and Colossians passages. Some worthy Reformed commentators, such as Charles Hodge, understand the 'old man' here (in verse 22) as being synonymous with the old corrupt nature still to be mortified. Again, we are not arguing against the need for the mortification of indwelling sin. But as far as the identity of the 'old man' is concerned, does Paul here attach a different idea from that used elsewhere? We think not, for the following reasons:

1. In the original text the sentence and thought is unbroken from verse 20 to verse 24, so that the 'putting off' of the old man is an element of what has been learned in Christ (verse 20). There is a contrast here between a former manner of conduct which was the character of the 'old man' and the manner of conduct now which is the character of the 'new man', as he has 'learned Christ'. It is therefore incongruous to maintain the co-existence in the believer of such contrasting clearly dominant life-styles. Also, because of the flow from verse 20, verse 22 becomes a consequence of what is stated in that verse, namely, you have learned Christ in this way, in that you have 'put off' the 'old man'.
2. The characteristic of the 'old man' in verse 22 as *'corrupt according to the deceitful lusts'*, – and in terms of the sort of conduct described in verses 18 and 19 – is seriously at variance with the description of the believer, the 'new man' – however much the believer may be conscious of indwelling sin.
3. Again, the tenses of the verbs 'put off' and 'put on' point to completed action in the past. The RSV is inaccurate by translating these in what is called the imperative in the present: *'Put off your old nature ... put on your new nature'*. It is, however, consistent with the context here to take these words as defining the content of the previous verbs or nouns. Thus, as John Murray has put it: *'the infinitives would express what believers had learned of Christ or had been taught by him'*. The idea is: *'So get rid of your old self, which made you live as you used to – the old self that was being destroyed by its deceitful desires'*.
4. The putting on of the 'new man' (verse 24) is part of how the believer has learned Christ. This 'new man' is described as *'created after (according to) God'*. This reminds us that the change from old to new is God's doing and it is consistent with the fact that the believer is now a new creation in Christ (2 Cor. 5:17; Eph. 2:10). The question, then, is: Can the believer really be at

the same time a new creation ('new man') and also an 'old man' with the character of verses 17 to 22? Surely not!

5. Finally, there is the analogy of the parallel passages already referred to. Would Paul speak in Romans 6 and Colossians 3 of a definite 'crucifixion' of the 'old man' and yet speak in Ephesians 4 as if the 'old man' were, after all, not so crucified? The conclusion is inescapable that the idea of the 'old man' is the same in all three passages where these terms are used. He has been 'crucified', he is 'dead'. In this way Paul indicates and emphasises the radical breach there has been on the part of the believer with the world and with the dominion of sin. And after all, the 'old man' is characterised by the dominion of sin.

### **The reality of indwelling sin still there**

But then the question must still be asked: Is this just a matter of the meaning of words? What about the reality of a Christian's experience? Are there not paradoxes here? Believers are said in one place to have died once and for all, in Christ, to sin, yet in another place are exhorted to mortify sin. And what do you make of Romans 7:14-25? Is that not a common Christian experience? How can you say that the 'old man' is dead, and yet you are happy to say that there is indwelling sin which needs to be put to death? Our concern must be to establish what Paul intended to teach in these passages in which he uses the terms 'old man' and 'new man'. It is clear that on the one hand he is dealing with a definitive breach with sin, and on the other hand with the fact that the believer is still imperfect. The believer has indwelling sin and must spend his life mortifying it. Robert Gromacki, commenting on Colossians 3:9 is helpful at this point: *'At conversion, the believing sinner positionally put off his old life ... In his daily life, however, he must appropriate his spiritual identification with Christ and put off the actual practice of sin'*.

The point here is that the old man is not indwelling sin but a 'person', specifically a person under the domination of sin and the flesh. To this 'person' the believer as a 'new man' stands in sharp contrast. The believer has only one position before God. It is not that he has put on new clothes over old rags. The old standing has been replaced by a new standing before God, in Christ and through Christ. At the same time he admittedly still retains elements or characteristics of the old nature. But there is a progressive renewal taking place which applies to the 'new man' in Christ. This element in fact is present in the passages discussed. In Ephesians 4:23 one result of learning Christ is renewal in the spirit of the mind. In Colossians 3:10 the new man is renewed in knowledge according to the image of the creator. As John Murray comments: *'The believer is a new man, a new creation, but he is still a new man not yet made perfect'*. So, in Paul's teaching, the 'old man' is the unregenerate man, whereas the 'new man' is the regenerate man in Christ. And just as we do not speak of men being both regenerate and unregenerate at the same time, it is inappropriate to speak of believers as being old men and new men at the same time.

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