

Words of Encouragement: The New Testament in a Phrase

If you were to try to capture the heart of our Christian message in a few phrases what would they be? Take a moment and think about it before reading further.

This is an exceptionally tough question I know, because there is so much that God has done for us in Christ. The answers we give would undoubtedly resonate with the great anthems of the church: salvation by grace through faith in Christ; Christ's sacrificial love; eternal God incarnate in human flesh; Christ's complete atonement on the cross; redemption and forgiveness by the blood of Christ; the Holy Spirit poured out by Christ on all flesh.... The things that the Spirit brings to mind as we contemplate such a question should lead us into spontaneous worship, so rich is God's favor upon us. That much is clear. What is less clear is whether we would soon arrive at a consensus in our answers to the question. Perhaps it was exercises just like this that gave rise to the great creeds of the Christian faith.

I find it compelling that based on the record of the New Testament, the early church did in fact have such a cornerstone phrase that captured their revelation and message. What I find unsettling is that in the list of answers we might compile as we contemplate the question today, there may be no reference to the expression that galvanized the early church. My list above is no exception.

We need to pause for a moment and recall some of the things that had transpired during the New Testament times. God had become a man, an event that was utterly inconceivable in the minds of most contemporary Hebrews (or for that matter virtually anyone in history right up to the present). The great hope of the coming Messiah had been fulfilled. If we were to hear those words afresh like the people of that day did, wouldn't we be anticipating some great coup that would cease foreign oppression, subjugate the arrogant ruling classes, end world hunger and—oh why not—solve global warming? We have to recognize that in Jesus, God fulfilled the Old Testament scriptures and satisfied the hope of Israel. But he didn't exactly meet their expectations.

That is the context in which this oft-repeated New Testament phrase takes on such significance. Consider Peter's words on the day of Pentecost (Acts 2:22 ff)

Men of Israel, listen to this: Jesus of Nazareth was a man accredited by God to you by miracles, wonders and signs, which God did among you through him, as you yourselves know. This man was handed over to you by God's set purpose and foreknowledge; and you, with the help of wicked men, put him to death by nailing him to the cross....

God has raised this Jesus to life, and we are all witnesses of the fact. Exalted to the right hand of God, he has received from the Father the promised Holy Spirit and has poured out what you now see and hear. For David did not ascend to heaven, and yet he said,

The Lord said to my Lord:

*"Sit at my right hand until I make your enemies
a footstool for your feet."*

Therefore let all Israel be assured of this: God has made this Jesus, whom you crucified, both Lord and Christ."

Peter says, God has made this Jesus both Lord (God) and Christ (Messiah deliverer). One person, both God and man. He is the one that will be at the right hand of God until his enemies are made his footstool. In other words, Jesus reigns unchallenged. No wonder Peter's hearers were struck through and asked, "What are we to do?"

Did you take note of the verse that Peter quotes in his speech? That is a direct quote from Psalm 110, and is the most often quoted Old Testament verse appearing in the New Testament. *This* was the phrase on which the times of the early church turned. Messiah has come. God has crowned his king—and Pentecost is the overflow of the coronation joys. A new era has dawned. Jesus shall reign at God's right hand until every enemy is made a footstool for his feet.

Read the entirety of Psalm 110—it speaks of the reign of God's chosen one. The first verse became a kind of shorthand in the early church for the unparalleled rule of the Lord Jesus Christ in the affairs of men and women. That is the heart of our message.

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