

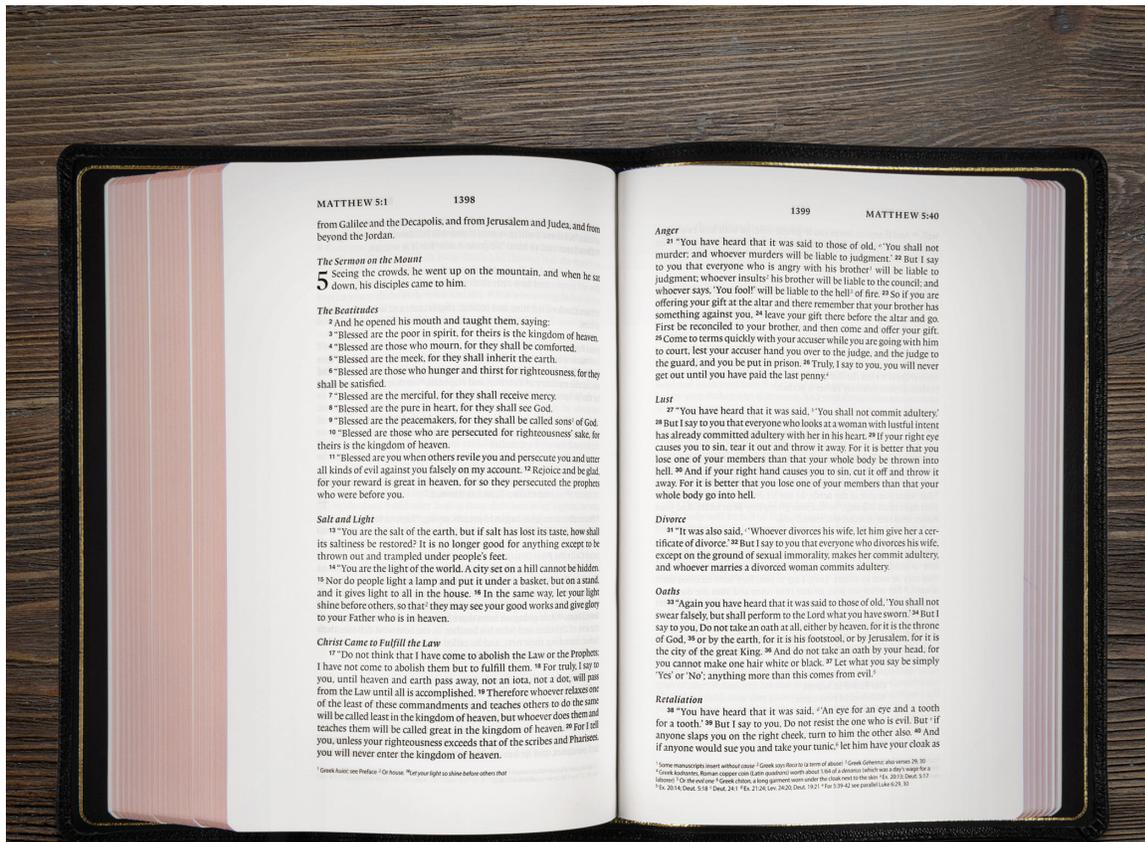
Theology for Life

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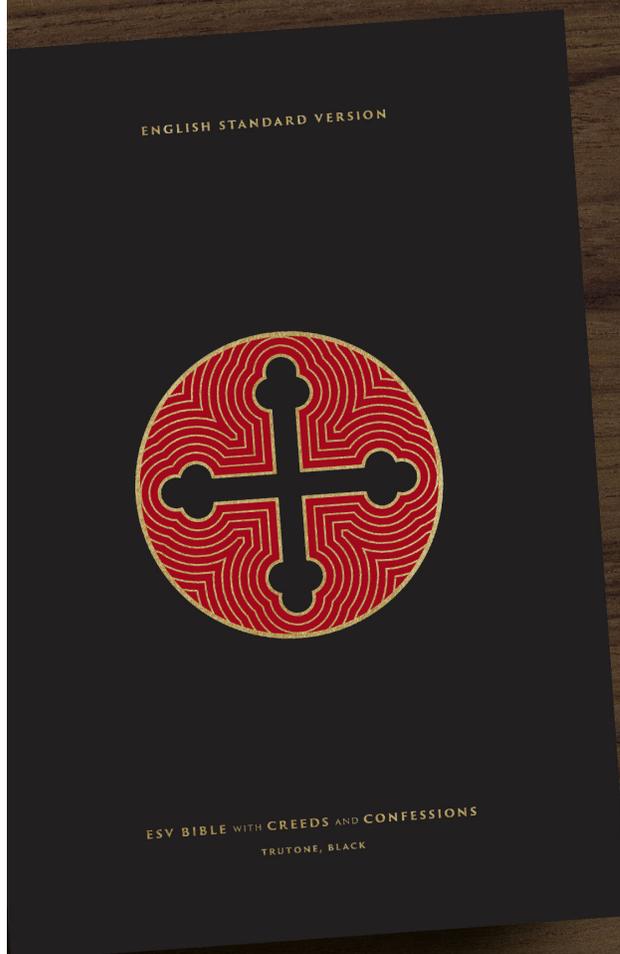


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Editor's Corner

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In Romans 8:1, Paul uses the word *therefore* to state a critical summary statement of what has already been said previously in the book. In the previous chapter, he states that the Christian's victory comes "*through Jesus Christ our Lord*" (Romans 7:23-25), which is linked to Romans 7:6, where the idea of new life in the Spirit is mentioned. Paul is completing his whole argument that began in Romans 3:21-5:21 about salvation in Christ. Now in Romans 8:1 he matches the "now" in Romans 7:6, showing how the new era of redemptive history has begun because of Christ Jesus for those who are now in a right standing before God because they are united to Christ.

No condemnation in Romans 8:1 echoes the statement of Romans 5:1, "*Therefore we have peace with God*", underscoring the teaching of the gospel first announced by Paul in Romans 1:16-17. There is no condemnation for the Christian because God has condemned sin in the flesh by sending Jesus (Romans 8:3) to pay the penalty for it through His death on the Cross. Romans 8:4-11 demonstrate that indwelling sin is overcome through the power of the indwelling Spirit.

The word "*no*" in Romans 8:1 in the Koine Greek is an emphatic negative adverb of time and carries the idea of complete cessation. In the Parable of Jesus about the king who forgave one of his slaves an overwhelming debt (Matthew 18:23-27), the Lord Jesus pictures the forgiveness of sins for those who humbly come in faith to Christ. The parable in Matthew 18:23-27 gets to the heart and soul of the gospel—Jesus completely and permanently paid the debt of sin and the penalty of the law for every person who humbly asks for mercy and trusts in Christ alone. In 1st John 2:1-2, God assures His people that, "*if anyone sins, we have*

an Advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous; and He Himself is the propitiation for our sins; and not for ours only, but also for those of the whole world."

Jesus not only pays the Christian's debt, but He also cleanses them "from all unrighteousness" (1st John 1:9), and imputes and imparts to each believer the perfect righteousness of Christ (Hebrews 10:4; Romans 5:17; 2nd Corinthians 5:21; Philippians 3:9). Jesus shares His vast heavenly inheritance with those who come to Him in faith (Ephesians 1:3; 11, 14). Such an immeasurable grace caused Paul to encourage Christians to continually be "giving thanks to the Father, who has qualified us to share in the inheritance of the saints in light" (Colossians 1:12). Having been qualified by God the Father, every Christian will never—under any circumstance—be subject to divine condemnation. How blessed it is, as a Christian, to be placed beyond the reach of condemnation.

In this issue of *Theology for Life*, we are discussing the idea of union with Christ and communion with Christ. As we return now to Romans 8:1, we discover the phrase, "in Christ". A Christian is someone who is *in Christ Jesus*.

Being a Christian is not merely being outwardly identified with Christ, but being *part of* Christ; not merely of being united with Him, but united in Him. Our being in Christ is one of the most profound mysteries, which we will not fully understand until we meet Him face to face in Heaven. However, Scripture does shed light on that marvelous truth.

We know that we are in Christ spiritually, in a divine and permanent union. "For as in Adam all die, so also in Christ all shall be made alive," Paul explains in 1st Corinthians 15:22. Believers are also in Christ in a living, participatory sense. "Now you are Christ's body," Paul declares in that same epistle, "and individually members of it" (12:27). We are a part of Him, and in ways that are unfathomable to us now, we work when He works, grieve when He grieves, and rejoice when He rejoices. "For by one spirit we were all baptized into one body," Paul assures us, "whether Jews or Greeks, whether slaves or free, and we were all made to drink of one Spirit" (1st Corinthians 12:13). Christ's own divine life pulses through the people of God.

As you read this issue, my prayer is that you'll not only be familiarized with the concept of our union and communion with Christ, but that you'll grow in your understanding of this vital subject, helping you to grow and enjoy in the grace of God in Christ.

In Christ Alone,

Dave Jenkins
Executive Editor, *Theology for Life Magazine*

The Puritans on Union with Christ, Justification, and Regeneration

By Joel Beeke



A true and real union, (but which is only passive on their part,) [the elect] are united to Christ when his Spirit first takes possession of them, and infuses into them a principle of new life: the beginning of which life can be from nothing else but from union with the Spirit of Christ.... Fur-

ther, since faith is an act flowing from the principle of spiritual life, it is plain, that in a sound sense, it may be said, an elect person is truly and really united to Christ before actual faith. — HERMAN WITSIUS (1)

How does regeneration relate to the believer's union with Christ and his justification by faith alone? As on other matters, the Puritans were not silent on this question. Thomas Halyburton (1674–1712), a Puritan-minded minister and theologian in the Church of Scotland, provides a particularly incisive look into the relationship between regeneration and justification in his work, *A Modest Inquiry Whether Regeneration or Justification Has the Precedency in Order of Nature*.⁽²⁾ Does justification, “in the order of nature, precede the renovation of our natures by the spirit of Christ...Or, on the other hand, are elect sinners first renewed, regenerated, and furnished with a principle of life...whereon justification follows in the same instant of time, yet as consequent in order of nature?”⁽³⁾ Sensitive to the intricacies bound up with this question, Halyburton catalogs a number of difficulties on both sides of the question.

Supposing that regeneration precedes justification, Halyburton lists the following seven difficulties: (1.) How can God, in His wisdom, impart His image to a sinner who is under a curse? (2.) How then can a sinner who is under God's curse be “dignified with the image of God”? (3.) How can the object of justification be a renewed saint, which would seem to contradict Romans 4:5? (4.) Can a soul partake of spiritual life before union with Christ? “Union is by faith, by which we come to Christ for life: but this renders it needless, because we have life before union.” (5.) This

“How can the object of justification be a renewed saint, which would seem to contradict Romans 4:5?”

order would make receiving the Spirit antecedent to union and faith, but we receive the Spirit by faith (Galatians 3:14). (6.) This would make the heart purified before faith, but the heart is purified by faith (Acts 15:9). (7.) A person becomes a Christian by the Word; the Word is received by faith, which suggests that faith should precede regeneration. (4) These various problems and mysteries follow from the view that regeneration precedes justification.

On the other hand, if justification precedes regeneration, there are also several difficulties involved. The first is ecclesiastical in nature, namely, Reformed divines “harmoniously teach the contrary”; and the Reformed confessions likewise deny that justification precedes regeneration. Moreover, how can acts of life exist if there is not an abiding principle for them from which to proceed? Even more pertinently, how can a dead soul “be the subject of this noblest act of faith that unites to Christ”? After all, there are many acts of justifying faith, such as assenting, choosing, approving, and resting in Christ. Can a dead soul do these things? The fruit of faith needs a root, and a dead root will not do. (5) Halyburton claims that these and other difficulties exist with the view that justification precedes regeneration.

“Those who were elected in Christ in eternity past are those for whom Christ died and rose again in time past...”

Threefold Union

Reformed theologians in seventeenth-century Britain typically posited a threefold union with Christ in terms of God’s immanent, transient, and applicatory works. Some even spoke of justification in relation to these three stages, which led to the doctrine of eternal justification. (6) “Immanent union” refers to being elected in union with Christ from all eternity, before the foundation of the world (Ephesians 1:4); “transient union” refers to believer’s union with Christ in time past, in His mediatorial death and resurrection (Romans 6:3–11); and “applicatory union” re-

fers to the believer's experience of union with Christ in the present time (Ephesians 2:5–6). Peter Bulkeley (1583–1659) follows this threefold pattern when he refers to the doctrine of justification, first, “as purposed and determined in the mind and will of God...Second, as impetrated and obtained for us by the obedience of Christ...Third, as actually applied unto us.”(7) The third stage of union with Christ is often referred to as our “mystical” union with Christ.

Halyburton notes these distinctions and stresses that each part of this threefold union with Christ is related to the others in a fundamental way. Those who were elected in Christ in eternity past are those for whom Christ died and rose again in time past, and they are the ones to whom the Holy Spirit applies all the benefits of Christ's mediatorial work. There is a unity in God's will. All three persons of the Godhead concurred in the work of salvation in the eternal covenant of redemption. That is to say, the salvation of the elect is certain because it is rooted in the eternal, unchangeable decree of God. Moreover, there was a “general justification” effected by Christ's oblation, but this is not “justification properly and strictly called.”(8) Even for those who spoke of justification as eternal (e.g., Thomas Goodwin [1600–1680]), a sinner nevertheless abides under the wrath of God until he or she believes.(9)

Clearly, therefore, there are various ways in which believers are united to Christ, and they are all necessary for salvation. No one will come to faith in Christ who has not been elected in eternity, and not without the benefit of Christ's oblation and intercession. The Puritans seemed to be agreed on the relationship between the believer's experiential union with Christ and the believer's personal regeneration.

The Chief Blessing?

Of all the blessings of salvation, which is the chief or primary blessing? Is it justification by faith, that “article of faith by which the church stands or falls” (*articulus stantis aut cadentis Ecclesiae*)?(10) In the judgment of several significant Puritan theologians, union with Christ, not

justification by faith, is the chief blessing a Christian receives from God. The believer's union with Christ enables him/her to receive all the benefits of Christ's work, including justification, adoption, and sanctification. To have Christ is to have all.

John Calvin's famous statement in the opening words of the third book of the *Institutes*, on the importance of union with Christ, shows the basic continuity between the Reformers and the Puritans on this point. (11) Calvin asks, "How do we receive those benefits which the Father bestowed on his only-begotten Son—not for Christ's own private use, but that he might enrich poor and needy men?" He answers, "First, we must understand that as long as Christ remains outside of us, and we are separated from him, all that he has suffered and done for the salvation of the human race remains useless and of no value for us." (12) In plain terms therefore, Calvin argues, the absolute necessity of union with Christ for salvation. So long as we stand apart from Christ, nothing He did as mediator can be of use to us.

The Puritans agreed with Calvin on the necessity of union with Christ. For John Owen (1616–1683), union with Christ is the "principle and measure of all spiritual enjoyments and expectations." (13) He notes moreover that the first spiritual grace is "dignity", that is, "it is the greatest, most honourable, and glorious of all graces that we are made partakers of." (14) Thomas Goodwin similarly comments that "being in Christ, and united to him, is the fundamental constitution of a Christian." (15) These comments provide insight into how union with Christ relates to justification, adoption, and sanctification.

Union with Christ and the *Ordo Salutis*

As Halyburton notes, the common Reformed view on the order of justification and regeneration is that the latter precedes the former. But what about the role of union with Christ in relation to regeneration and justification? Goodwin affirms, as one would expect, that union with Christ is the "first fundamental thing of justification, and sanctification

and all.”(16) Thus, in specific relation to justification, Goodwin maintains that “all acts of God’s justifying us depend upon union with Christ, we having him, and being in him first, and then thereby having right to his righteousness.”(17)

But in relation to regeneration or, more specifically, effectual calling, Goodwin argues that union with Christ precedes regeneration. Christ first “apprehends” the believer: “It is not my being regenerate that puts me into a right of all those privileges, but it is Christ [who] takes me, and then gives me his Spirit, faith, holiness, etc. It is through our union with Christ, and the perfect holiness of his nature, to whom we are united, that we partake of the privileges of the covenant of grace.”(18) This statement appears to indicate that union with Christ logically (not chronologically), precedes not only justification—a typical Reformed view—but even regeneration (narrowly considered).

What makes Goodwin’s views on this matter perplexing is the fact that within the space of six pages he affirms there is a “threefold union with Christ”(19) and a “twofold union with Christ.”(20) The first union is a relational union, like the union between a husband and wife. “And this union is fully and completely done when first we are turned to God, and when Christ takes us.”(21)

The second union involves the indwelling of Christ in the human body (Ephesians 3:17)—“an actual inbeing of his person.” The third is objective; that is, having Christ as an object of faith “as the faculty doth view an object.”(22) When Goodwin later speaks of the twofold union, he has in mind the first two under the heading of a “substantial union and communicative union.”(23)

The union that we are especially concerned with is the first union, the union whereby the sinner is married to Christ. How does this happen? Returning to Goodwin’s comment above that “Christ takes me, and then gives me his Spirit, faith, holiness, etc.”, we are faced with the question of whether union with Christ precedes faith itself.

Goodwin’s book, *The Object and Act of Justifying Faith*, is helpful in

answering this question. In it, he speaks of the act of the will completing the union between Christ and the believer, which makes believers “ultimately one with him.”(24) However, as the Bride, we are simply confirming the union that has taken place. So, contrary to the common view of marriage, which requires the consent of both partners since a man cannot marry a woman against her will, there is a spiritual union on Christ’s part to the elect that does not require assent from the sinner “because it is a secret work done by his Spirit, who doth first apprehend us ere we apprehend him.”(25) That is to say, Christ establishes a union with the elect sinner by “apprehending” him and then giving the Spirit to him. But this union is only complete (“ultimate union”) when the sinner exercises faith in Christ. This basic pattern is confirmed later in Goodwin’s work on justifying faith:

It is true indeed the union on Christ’s part is in order of nature first made by the Spirit; therefore Philip. iii. 12, he is said first to “comprehend us ere we can comprehend him;” yet that which makes the union on our part is faith, whereby we embrace and cleave to him...It is faith alone that doth it. Love indeed makes us cleave to him also, but yet faith first.(26)

Goodwin is at his finest when he speaks of Christ “taking”, “apprehending”, and “comprehending” the sinner. Christ “takes hold of us before we believe” and “works a thousand and a thousand operations in our souls to which our faith concurs nothing...Christ dwells in us and works in us, when we act not and know not our union, nor that it is he that works.”(27)

Before the new believer is aware, our Lord unites us to Himself (“takes hold of us”) and works in us. The Spirit then regenerates the sinner, who in turn exercises faith toward Christ and completes the union. From that union flows all other spiritual blessings.

Owen highlights a number of ways in which union with Christ functions as the “greatest” of all graces. In terms of the present question, his point that union with Christ is the “first and principal grace in respect of

causality and efficacy” is most pertinent to how we locate union with Christ in the *ordo salutis*. Like Goodwin, Owen claims that union with Christ is the cause of all other graces a believer receives: “Hence is our adoption, our justification, our sanctification...our perseverance, our resurrection, our glory.”(28)

Therefore, union with Christ is the ground of the imputation of Christ’s righteousness to believers.(29) Owen’s lengthy work on justification (volume 5) confirms the logical priority of union with Christ before other graces such as justification.(30) But regarding the relationship between union and regeneration, Owen seems to take a view similar to Goodwin’s. At first glance it appears this is not so, for Owen argues that no one “who hath not been made partaker of the washing of regeneration and the renovation of the Holy Ghost, can possibly have any union with Christ.”(31)

This seems to posit a logical priority of regeneration to union. But Owen then remarks immediately after that statement: “I do not speak this as though our purifying were in order of time and nature antecedent unto our union with Christ, for indeed it is an effect thereof; but it is such an effect as immediately and inseparably accompanieth it, so that where the one is not, there is not the other.”(32)

With a little more precision than Goodwin, though basically affirming the same position, Owen asserts that the act whereby Christ unites Himself to His elect is the same act whereby He regenerates them.(33)

Dutch theologian Herman Witsius (1636–1708), writing on the Continent in the same period as Owen and Goodwin—his work was a contribution to the British Antinomian and Neonomian debates—takes a similar position concerning the relationship between regeneration and union with Christ. He affirms:

“By a true and real union, (but which is only passive on their part,) [the elect] are united to Christ when his Spirit first takes possession of them, and infuses into them a principle of new life: the beginning of which life can be from nothing else but from un-

ion with the Spirit of Christ.... Further, since faith is an act flowing from the principle of spiritual life, it is plain, that in a sound sense, it may be said, an elect person is truly and really united to Christ before actual faith.”

Witsius sounds very much like Goodwin and Owen in insisting that the elect are united to Christ when Christ’s Spirit “takes possession of them” and regenerates them. And he likewise affirms that union precedes actual faith. But then he makes a similar point to Goodwin’s, namely, that a “mutual union” inevitably follows from the principle of regeneration:

“But the mutual union, (which, on the part of an elect person, is likewise active and operative), whereby the soul draws near to Christ, joins itself to him, applies, and in a becoming and proper manner closes with him without any distraction, is made by faith only. And this is followed in order by the other benefits of the covenant of grace, justification, peace, adoption, sealing, perseverance, etc.”(34)

Not only is the “mutual union” emphasized by the act of faith in the sinner, but also by the fact that the benefits of the covenant of grace (e.g., justification) flow out of this union.

Goodwin, Owen, and Witsius are affirming what John Ball (1585–1640) had said earlier in *A Treatise of Faith*. Speaking of the order of spiritual blessings that believers receive from Christ, Ball affirms that faith is the “band whereby we are united unto Christ; after Union followeth Communion with him; Justification, Adoption, Sanctification be the benefits and fruits of Communion.”(35) Commenting on the importance of union with Christ, Ball later affirms that after we are made one with Christ, “he and all his benefits are truly and verily made ours; his name is put upon us, we are justified from the guilt and punishment of sin, we are clothed with his righteousness, we are sanctified against the power of sin, having our nature healed and our hearts purified.”(36)

John Preston (1587–1628) likewise affirms that “to be in Christ is

the ground of all salvation.”(37) Thus, union with Christ is the motive for good works since all graces and privileges flow from this union.(38) Christ will take away not only the guilt but also the power of sin in those to whom He is united, which explains the importance of union with Christ for soteriology.(39)

Thomas Cole (1627–1697) entertains a very important question that helps explain the subtle ways in which regeneration and justification relate. He asks, “Whether the first step in Regeneration be from Sin to Holiness, or from a sinful state and nature to Christ, that we may be made holy by him?” That is, are we made clean first, or are we joined to Christ first? Cole explains:

“There can be no Change made in our Nature by the Spirit of Christ in our Sanctification, but upon a Change of State from our closing in with the Blood of Christ for Justification. The Spirit of Christ doeth always follow the Blood of Christ; ’tis the Purchase of that Blood; so that the sanctifying Spirit of Christ, extends himself in all his saving Operations, no further than the Body of Christ; none but Members vitally joined to Christ their Head, can be quickened by him; therefore no man or woman can be savingly wrought upon by the Spirit of Christ, who continue in a state of separation from him.”(40)

Cole has carefully noted how all these benefits come from Christ, and therefore regeneration must be seen in the light of our union with Christ. He then offers a very precise definition of regeneration, saying that “*Regeneration is the Implantation of the Soul into Christ.*”(41)

William B. Evans has recently argued that for the Puritans, communion with Christ “tended to displace ‘union with Christ.’”(42) This charge is utterly unconvincing as the evidence above shows. Union with Christ is the basis for communion with Him and, like Calvin, the Puritans viewed union with Christ in His divine-human person as the necessary context in which, and the means by which, redemptive benefits were applied to the elect. Evans’s point assumes that the Puritans devi-

ated from a Reformed Christological focus, but clearly they understood how union and communion worked together. William Bridge (1600–1671) said that “union is the root of communion” and “union is the ground of communion.” In context, Bridge is explaining the benefits of our union with Christ. He did not displace union with Christ but instead affirmed it as the foundation for his practical theology.(43) Similarly, Obadiah Grew (1607–1689) said, “Union is the ground of all our comfort, and privilege we have by the Lord Jesus Christ: Our communion springs from our Union with him.”(44) Bridge and Grew did not sever the believer’s communion with Christ from his union with Him.

There is a reason union with Christ is first in the order of nature and regeneration precedes justification. When Christ takes and unites the sinner to Himself, the Spirit regenerates the sinner. In regenerating the sinner, he is still guilty, that is, legally in a state of sin. True, he has a new nature, but that has not altered his legal status for past offenses (and all offenses thereafter)—no more than a murderer is exonerated because afterwards he becomes a model citizen. According to Stephen Charnock (1628–1680), it is when the sinner looks in faith to Christ that his status changes.(45)

Justification “gives us a *right*, the other [regeneration] a *fitness*.” He also says, “In justification we are freed from the guilt of sin, and so have a title to life; in regeneration we are freed from the filth of sin, and have the purity of God’s image in part restored to us.”(46) A sinner is not justified because he/she was regenerated, but because Christ has paid the penalty of his/her sins and has applied all His benefits to him/her.(47)

The real is before the legal because both are needed, and in one sense neither depends on the other; both depend on the believer’s union with Christ from whom the believer derives all saving benefits. Yet there is another sense in which justification depends on regeneration—that is, the person is enabled to believe by regeneration and is justified by faith alone. Charnock says, “Justification is *relative*; regeneration *internally real*. Union with Christ is the ground of both; Christ is the meritorious cause of

both.”(48)

Another aspect of union with Christ is addressed by William Lyford (1598–1653). He very precisely stated that we are united to Christ before we exercise faith, and that we in turn exercise faith to lay hold of Christ. Such a statement may be misunderstood, however carefully stated. Apparently the Synod of New England charged John Cotton (1585–1652) of

“How can someone else’s
righteousness become ours?”

teaching an error when he allegedly stated “that we are completely united to Christ, before, or without any faith wrought in us by the Spirit.”(49) Cotton refuted the charge to the Synod’s satisfaction, yet it seems the word

“completely” was the source of his problem. Lyford believed it could be misleading to distinguish between the *act of*

faith we exercise and the *habit of faith* we possess in our union with Christ, for “it seems to favour of the Leaven of *Antinomianism* and *Enthusiasm*.”

Yet he also recognized that it does impart some truth as long as the “Faith is begun in action”—he was weary of viewing this union as being complete without the immediate exercise of faith. “The Union then is begun by action of the Spirit on us, and of Faith put forth by us to lay hold on Christ.”(50)

Lyford adds one more point that is critical to the Puritans’ view of union with Christ and justification. How can someone else’s righteousness become ours? This was a question raised by the Papists. Lyford answers by pointing to our union with Christ: “Christ and the Believer be not Two, but One.” He explains, “*Peter* cannot be saved by the righteousness that is in *Paul*, because they be two; but the Members are saved by the righteousness of their Head, because Head and Members are not two.”(51)

The same answer is offered by Obadiah Grew. “A man’s capacity for

such propriety in Christ's righteousness, is this union with Christ." Union with Christ is the ground on which His righteousness can become ours. "As by marriage-union the Wife is honourable by her Husband's honour... Thus comes it to pass by our union of espousals to Christ, My beloved is mine, and I am his: that we have an interest and propriety in his merit and spirit, in his righteousness and life."(52)

Lyford and Grew believed that our union with Christ was the best refutation of the Papists' denial of the imputation of Christ's righteousness. Because we are united to Christ, His righteousness can be and is imputed to us by faith.

Conclusion

For the Puritans, the doctrine of regeneration was a fundamental aspect of soteriology, and its relation to the believer's union with Christ was hugely significant. Union with Christ was typically understood in a three-fold manner: immanent/eternal, transient/redemptive-historical, and applicatory/mystical. The redemption purposed by God in eternity and accomplished by Christ in time is incomplete until it is applied in the experience of the believer.

The special work of the Spirit is to apply the benefits of Christ's mediation to the elect. There is a strict correspondence between Christ's work and the Spirit's work. For this reason, regeneration must never be considered apart from Christ; positively stated, regeneration must always be understood in relation to union with Christ.

What this article has shown is not only the fundamental necessity of regeneration for salvation, but also its close connection to union with Christ. The risen Savior first apprehends the elect and makes them alive by His Spirit operating as the Spirit of Christ, so they can receive from Christ all the benefits of the work He accomplished on their behalf, as their mediator.

Faith is only possible because Christ, through the Spirit, has joined Himself to the sinner. In response, the sinner exercises faith toward

Christ, as an effect of regeneration. With the union complete, the sinner receives from Christ everything that Christ merited, including justification, adoption, and sanctification. This, in a nutshell, is the Puritan understanding of the relationship between regeneration and union with Christ.

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2. Thomas Halyburton, *A Modest Inquiry Whether Regeneration or Justification Has the Precedency in Order of Nature*, in *The Works of the Rev. Thomas Halyburton...* (London: Thomas Tegg & Son, 1835).
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6. See chapter 8, "Thomas Goodwin and Johannes Maccovius on Justification from Eternity."
7. Peter Bulkeley, *The Gospel-Covenant* (London: Tho[m]as Parker, 1674), 358.
8. Halyburton, *A Modest Inquiry*, in *Works*, 550.
9. That is, "until the Holy Spirit doth in due time actually apply Christ unto them" (WCF, 11.4).
10. Interestingly, Robert J. McKelvey has shown that Martin Luther may never have called justification the article by which the church stands or falls, even though the concept belongs to him. McKelvey writes: "Though the 'stands or falls' wording is often attributed to Martin Luther a primary source has never been cited. He could still be the originator of the phrase, as attribution to him comes as early as the seventeenth century. For example, William Eyre refers to justification as '*articulus stantis aut cadentis Ecclesiae*, as Luther calls it'.... Thus, Richard John Neuhaus... wrongly argues that the 'stands or falls' phrase did not originate until the eighteenth century." Robert J. McKelvey, "That Error and Pillar of Antinomianism: Eternal Justification," in *Drawn into Controversie: Reformed Theological Diversity and Debates within Seventeenth-Century British Puritanism*, ed. Michael A. G. Haykin and Mark Jones (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2011), chap. 10.
11. Three recent studies on Calvin that address his doctrine of union with Christ are worth considering, though they are not without their different emphases and disagreements in places. See Cornelis P. Venema, *Accepted and Renewed in Christ: The "Twofold Grace of God" and the Interpretation of Calvin's Theology* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2007); Todd J. Billings, *Calvin, Participation, and the Gift: The Activity of Believers in Union with Christ* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007); and Mark A. Garcia, *Life in Christ: Union with Christ and Twofold Grace in Calvin's Theology* (Milton Keynes: Paternoster, 2008). Cf. Lee Gatiss, "The Inexhaustible Fountain of All Goodness: Union with Christ in Calvin's Commentary and Sermons on Ephesians," *Themelios* 34, no. 2 (July 2009): 194–206.

How a Familiar Truth Forever Changed Hudson Taylor

By John Piper

On September 4, 1869, when he was thirty-seven years old, Hudson Taylor found a letter waiting for him at Zhen-jiang from John McCarthy. God used the letter to revolutionize Taylor's life. "When my agony of soul was at its height, a sentence in a letter from dear McCarthy was used to remove the scales from my eyes, and the Spirit of God revealed to me the truth of our oneness with Jesus as I had never known it before."¹



Notice two things about that sentence. One is that the change in Taylor didn't come through new information. Taylor knew his Bible, and he knew what Keswick teachers were saying. Just that year, the magazine *Revival* had carried a series of articles by Robert Pearsall Smith on "the victorious life"²—one of the catchphrases of the Keswick teaching. These articles had been the inspiration for McCarthy's own experience that he was now sharing with Taylor. It was not a new teaching. It was one familiar sentence. We have all had experiences of this sort: the same truth we have read a hundred times explodes with new power in our lives. That happened for Taylor.

The other thing to notice is that the truth that exploded was his "oneness with Jesus". And Taylor says it carefully: "the Spirit of God revealed to me the truth of our oneness with Jesus *as I had never known it before.*" He knew it before, but this time the Holy Spirit gave him a new sight of the wonder of it. This is exactly the way he understood it.

The prayer of Ephesians 1:18 was answered as never before: "*having the eyes of your hearts enlightened, that you may know...*" Taylor said:

"As I read, I saw it all! [...] I looked to Jesus and saw (and when I saw, oh, how joy flowed!) that He had said, 'I will never leave thee.'³

"I saw not only that Jesus will never leave me, but that I am a member of His body, of His flesh and of His bones. The vine is not the root merely, but all—root, stem, branches, twigs, leaves, flowers, fruit. And Jesus is not that alone—He is soil and sunshine, air and showers, and ten thousand times more than we have ever dreamed, wished for or needed. Oh, the joy of seeing this truth!"⁴

This was not new information. This was the miracle of the eyes of the heart being opened to taste and see at a deeper level than had been tasted and seen before. "*Oh, taste and see that the Lord is good!*" (Psalm 34:8). And the center of what he saw and tasted was union with Christ: "The sweetest part, if one may speak of one part being sweeter than another, is the rest which full *identification* with Christ brings."⁵

The experience came to be known as the “exchanged life” because of Galatians 2:20, *“I have been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me.”*

Union with Christ

Along with a new sight of Christ’s fullness and his union with Christ, there was also a new “yieldedness”, which he described as: “Surrender to Christ [he] had long known, but this was more; this was a new yieldedness, a glad, unreserved handing over of self and everything to Him.”⁶ This new *yieldedness* was so powerful and so sweet—so supernatural—that it rose up like an indictment against all vain striving. When you have been swept up into the arms of Jesus, all previous efforts to jump in seem vain.

“Taylor experienced such a powerful revelation of the inexpressible reality of union with Christ, as an absolute and glorious fact of security and sweetness and power, that it carried in it its own effectiveness.”

At the heart of the discovery was this—the fruit of the vine comes from abiding, not striving:

“To let my loving Saviour work in me His will, my sanctification, is what I would live for by His grace. Abiding, not striving nor struggling; looking off unto Him; trusting Him for present power; resting in the love of an almighty Saviour.”⁷

From the consciousness of union springs the power to abide. Let us, then not seek, not wait, not pursue, but now accept by faith the Saviour’s word: “Ye are the branches.”⁸ When you have been swept up into the arms of Jesus, all previous efforts to jump in seem vain.

Taylor experienced such a powerful revelation of the inexpressible reality of union with Christ, as an absolute and glorious fact of security and sweetness and power, that it carried in it its own effectiveness. It

gave vivid meaning to the difference between the works of the flesh and the fruit of the Spirit: “Work is the outcome of effort; fruit, of life. A bad man may do good work, but a bad tree cannot bear good fruit.”⁹

“How to get faith strengthened? Not by striving after faith, but by resting on the Faithful One.”¹⁰ Unlike many who claimed a higher-life experience, Taylor really was lifted to a plane of joy and peace and strength that lasted all his life. He wrote, “Never again did the unsatisfied days come back; never again was the needy soul separated from the fullness of Christ.”¹¹ Just before turning sixty, Taylor was in Melbourne, Australia. An Episcopalian minister had heard of Keswick, and after spending time with Taylor, he wrote: “Here was the real thing, an embodiment of ‘Keswick teaching’ such as I had never hoped to see. It impressed me profoundly. Here was a man almost sixty years of age, bearing tremendous burdens, yet absolutely calm and untroubled.”

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4. Cited in *ibid.*, 149–50.
5. Cited in *ibid.* Italics added. 30 *Ibid.*, 154.
6. Cited in *ibid.*, 144.
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8. Cited in James Hudson Taylor, *A Ribband of Blue, and Other Bible Studies*, Kindle edition (May 12, 2012), Locations 246–49.
9. Cited in Dr. and Mrs. Howard Taylor, *Hudson Taylor's Spiritual Secret*, 149.
10. Cited in *ibid.*, 153.
11. Cited in *ibid.*, 215.

Union with Christ: The Double Cure

By Michael Horton



Salvador was a Cuban spy, sent to Miami as a mole in order to learn military secrets from the United States government. However, Cuban nationalists with whom Salvador associated incognito eventually led the clever spy to renounce his loyalties to Castro. As a result, Salvador turned himself in to the United States government and they offered asylum, protection, and a new identity. The government masterminded a “murder” of Salvador so Castro's officials would assume the death of their spy, and once this plan was carried out Salvador was issued new documents, a new name, and a new life. Paul appeals to this sort of language when he answers the

question, “*What shall we say then? Shall we continue in sin that grace may abound?*” with his familiar response, “*Heaven forbid! How shall we who have died to sin live any longer in it? Or do you not know that as many of you as were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? Therefore, we were buried with him through baptism into death, that just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, even so we also should walk in newness of life. For if we have been united together in the likeness of his death, certainly we also shall be in the likeness of his resurrection*” (Romans 6:1-5).

The apostle goes on to speak of the crucifixion of our old identity and its burial, as the believer is raised with a new life. “*Let us never forget that our old selves died with him on the cross that the tyranny of sin over us might be broken—for a dead man can safely be said to be free from the power of sin*” (Romans 6:7, Phillips Translation).

Israel had long sought its identity in conforming to the Law. By outward observance, many thought union with the Law and with Moses would lead to the identity which brought fulfillment, hope, and salvation. But Christ alone possessed in Himself, in His essence as well as in His actions, the righteousness which God required of humanity. Therefore, only through union with Christ could the believer enjoy the identity of belonging to God. “*For sin can never be your master—you are no longer living under the Law, but under grace*” (Romans 6:14).

This new identity is not something we achieve by converting ourselves or by trying to enter into it. It is given to us graciously by God, apart from and outside of ourselves. Just as Salvador could never again return to his former identity and owed his loyalty to those who had given him the new identity, so “*released from the service of sin, you entered the service of righteousness*” (Romans 6:19). Before, righteousness made no claims on us to which we could respond favorably, but now, because we are united to Christ, new affections and new loyalties produce new service.

It is important to realize that Christ does not come to improve the

old self, to guide and redirect it to a better life; He comes to kill our old self, in order to raise us to newness of life. He is not the friend of the old self, only too happy to be of service. He is its mortal enemy, bent on replacing it with a new self. Notice that the new birth is not the same as justification. The contemporary Wesleyan theologian, John Lawson, confuses justification and the new birth in precisely the same manner as medieval scholasticism: “To be justified is the first and all-important stage in a renewed manner of life, actually changed for the better in mind and

heart, in will and action.” Further,

“While none of our righteousness is
our own, Christ is!”

“regeneration is an alternative word for the initial step in the life of saving faith in Christ. The legal term ‘justification’ has in mind this step...” (*Introduction to Christian Doctrine*, pp. 226-7).

We are not justified by conversion; rather, conversion or the new birth is the gift of God given to those who are spiritually dead and, therefore, unable to

choose Christ. In the new birth, God grants the faith necessary to respond positively and it is through this faith, not conversion itself, that one is accepted by God.

What Is “Union With Christ”?

If this doctrine is, as John Murray wrote, “the central truth of the whole doctrine of salvation”, what does it mean and why is it so important?

First, union with Christ describes the reality of which Paul wrote in Romans chapter six. As a husband and wife are united through marriage and a parent and a child are united through birth, so we are united to Christ through the Spirit's baptism. Those who are familiar with the historical (if not contemporary) discourses of Reformed and Lutheran preaching will immediately recognize the emphasis on the objective work

of Christ in history. Themes such as election, the incarnation, the substitutionary atonement, the active and passive obedience of Christ, justification, adoption, and the objective aspect of sanctification (i.e., the declaration that we are already holy in Christ), form the diet of the best and most biblically faithful preaching. Each of these themes serves to remind the believer that his or her righteousness is found not within, but outside.

Nevertheless, there is a subjective aspect to our union with Christ which receives equal attention in Scripture and, therefore, commands equal attention from us. Calvin wrote, “We must understand that as long as Christ remains outside of us, and we are separated from him, all that he has suffered and done for the salvation of the human race remains useless and of no value for us...All that he possesses is nothing to us until we grow into one body with him” (*Institutes*, III.i.1).

All of our righteousness, holiness, redemption, and blessing is found outside of us—in the person and work of Christ. This was the declaration of the Scriptures and, following the sacred text, of the reformers, in the face of a subjective righteousness located in the believer. And yet, as Calvin points out, this “alien righteousness” belonging to someone outside of us would mean nothing if this righteous one remained forever outside of us. An illustration might help at this point. In my junior year of college, I went to Europe with some friends and ran out of money. Happily, my parents agreed to deposit enough money in my account to cover my expenses. Was that now my money? I had not earned it. I had not worked for it. It was not my money in the sense that I had done something to obtain it. But it was in my account now and I could consider it my own property.

While none of our righteousness is our own, Christ is! While none of our holiness belongs to us, properly speaking, Christ does! The devils know Christ is righteous, but they do not, cannot, believe that He is their righteousness.

It is essential, therefore, to point unbelievers and believers alike to

Christ outside of their own subjective experiences and actions, but that is only half the story! The Christ who has done everything necessary for our salvation in history outside of us now comes to indwell us in the person of His Holy Spirit. *“God has chosen to make known among the Gentiles the glorious riches of this mystery, which is Christ in you, the hope of glory”* (Colossians 1:27). While our assurance is rooted in the objective work of Christ for us, it is also true that *“We know that we live in him and he in us, because he has given us of his Spirit”* (1st John 4:13).

John employs this language of union in his Gospel, where Jesus is referred to as a vine, with believers as branches (John 15). As the branch is dead apart from the life-giving nourishment of the vine, so humans are spiritually dead unless they are connected to the vine. Elsewhere he captures Jesus’ words, *“Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood remains in me, and I in him”* (John 6:56). As baptism is a sign and seal of our attachment to the vine (the beginning of our union), the Lord's Supper is a sign and seal of our perpetual nourishment from the vine.

Paul appeals to this doctrine as the organizing principle for his entire systematic theology. The First Adam/Second Adam contrast in Romans five depends on this notion. “In Adam” we possess all that he possesses: original sin, judgment, condemnation, fear, alienation; “in Christ” we possess all of His righteousness, holiness, eternal life, justification, adoption, and blessing. Further, *“Even when we were dead in trespasses, God made us alive together with Christ (by grace you have been saved), and raised us up together, and made us sit together in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus...”* (Ephesians 2:5). *“I have been crucified with Christ,”* Paul declares, *“and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me”* (Galatians 2:20).

Thus, this doctrine is the wheel which unites the spokes of salvation and keeps them in proper perspective. “In Christ” (i.e., through union with Him) appears, by my accounting, nine times in the first chapter of Ephesians. Chosen in Christ before the foundation of the world, God has thus “made us accepted in the Beloved.” He cannot love us directly because of our sinfulness, but He can love us in union with Christ, because

He is the one the Father loves. “In Him we have redemption”; “in Him we have an inheritance”, and so on.

Union with Christ and Conversion

This doctrine is another way of saying, “Christ alone!” All spiritual blessings in heavenly places are found in Him. Even the gifts of the Holy Spirit are through and for the ministry of Christ the Mediator. No one is baptized in the Holy Spirit, but baptized by the Holy Spirit into Christ.

Regeneration, or the new birth, is the commencement of this union. God brings this connection and baptism even before there is any sign of life—“*while you were dead...he made you alive*” (Ephesians 2:1). The first gift of this union is faith, the sole instrument through which we live and remain on this vine. But this is a rich vine, pregnant with nourishing sap to produce an abundance of fruit. Though we are not attached to nor remain attached to this vine by the fruit (what branch depends on the fruit?), those who are truly members of Christ inevitably produce fruit. Through union with Christ, we receive His righteousness imputed (justification), as well as His righteousness imparted (sanctification).

So conversion to Christ is one aspect of a prior work of God's grace in uniting us to His Son. At this point, then, it is essential to relate this to contemporary concerns.

1. Two-Stage Schemes

Human-centered religion has always created two paths to life: one for the spiritually-gifted and another for those who settle for heaven, but not the “abundant life”. Roman Catholicism (medieval and modern) has offered this in terms of distinguishing between the priesthood and others in the category of “the religious” on one hand, and “the seculars”. Further, there are those who have indulged in venial sins (those which can interrupt fellowship with God) and mortal sins (those which can clear the board and make one start from scratch).

Evangelicals have done this, in part, by following the “Higher Life” version of conversion and the Christian life, in which super-saints (often

involved in “full-time Christian ministry”) are “filled with the Spirit”, while normal (i.e., “carnal”) Christians make it to heaven, but without having any of the gifts of the Spirit.

“The Holy Spirit will fill us with His power the moment we are fully yielded,” declares Bill Bright, founder of Campus Crusade for Christ. “God would be breaking His own spiritual laws if He forced man to do His bidding.” It’s a tragedy that “at the time of conversion the will of man is temporarily yielded to the will of God”, but “after conversion, the heart frequently loses its first love” and therefore requires us to seek another filling. Just as the medieval believer required some ritual in order to fill up the bathtub of grace that had begun leaking from a venial sin, Bill Bright urges, “If a Christian is not filled, he is disobedient to the command of God and is sinning against God.” What is required is for the carnal Christian to follow the steps which would have been familiar to the medieval monk: First, “meditate”; second, “make it a practice to spend definite time each day in prayer for God’s guidance...”; one must also confess each sin, since “unconfessed sin keeps many Christians from being filled with the Holy Spirit” (*Handbook for Christian Maturity*, pp.133-145).

Charles Finney is even approvingly quoted by Bright: “Christians are as guilty for not being filled with the Holy Spirit as sinners are for not repenting. They are even more so, for as they have more light, they are so much the more guilty.” And Norman B. Harrison is cited: “The Spirit-filled life...is the only life that can please God.” Of course, the Reformation heirs reply to today’s medieval heirs, that there is only one life that can please God, and that is Christ’s. And because His life is accepted and we are in Him, hidden as it were, we are pleasing to God and are filled with the Spirit because every believer possesses everything of Christ’s.

What kind of father shares himself and his possessions with only a few favorites and withholds his best from others? Perhaps some would answer, “It’s not a matter of the generosity of the father, but of the children’s willingness to receive.” While that is logically coherent, it reveals a fundamentally different theological perspective. Union with Christ is not

the result of human decision, striving, seeking, yielding, or surrendering, but of Christ's. While we are called to be “filled with the Spirit” (Galatians 5:18), it is a figure of speech: “Do not be drunk with wine...but be filled with the Spirit.” In other words, make sure you're under the right influence!

2. Confusing Indicative and Imperative

Everywhere the Scriptures provide both the declaration of who we are in Christ (indicative) and the command to respond to that particular declaration in a certain way (imperative). For instance, Paul does not simply issue an imperative like, “Stop living with your boyfriend.” He says, “How should we who have died to sin live any longer in it?” Paul does not call people to die to sin; he does not invite them to enter into a higher level of abundant life; there are not appeals to become something which the believer is not already. The believer has died, is buried, is raised, is seated with Christ in the heavenlies, and so on. These are not plateaus for victorious Christians who have surrendered all, but realities for every believer regardless of how small one's faith or how weak one's repentance.

Thus, we must stop trying to convert believers into these realities by imperatives: “Do this”, “Confess that”, “Follow these steps”, and so on. Union with Christ ushers us into conversion, and conversion ushers us immediately into all of these realities so that, as Sinclair Ferguson writes, “The determining factor of my existence is no longer my past. It is Christ's past” (*Christian Spirituality: Five Views*, p.57).

For those who speak as though the filling of the Spirit, the gifts of the Spirit, justification, the new birth, and union with Christ are things to be attained by obedience to imperatives, Paul insists, “*But of him [God] you are in Christ Jesus, who became for us wisdom from God—and righteousness and sanctification and redemption—that, as it is written, ‘He who glories, let him glory in the Lord’*” (1st Corinthians 1:30-31).

3. Quietism & Legalism

Some Christians so emphasize a “let go and let God” passivity that even after conversion they act as though they believe they are still “dead in trespasses and sins” and do not “understand the things of the Spirit of God”. Wanting to attribute everything to grace and God's work, they confuse justification and sanctification, just as surely as those who want to underscore human involvement. In our initial conversion we are passive: acted upon rather than active, as Luther put it. We are justified through receiving what someone else has earned for us. But we grow in sanctification through living out what someone else has earned for us. Both are gifts we inherit from someone else, but the former is passively received and the second is actively pursued. If I were a pauper who had some benefactor deposit one billion dollars in my bank account, I would be regarded a billionaire; but there would be the need to share this new wealth with friends living on the street. The gift was received passively, but in turn it was put to use for good actively.

If sanctification is confused with justification, it will lose the tension, reality, and rigor necessary for the battles of the Christian life; if justification is confused with sanctification, the product will be of no redemptive value.

Therefore, let us distinguish conversion from justification and realize that initial conversion is a passive reception of God's gracious acceptance of us in Christ, while the life-long conversion process is an active pursuit of holiness and righteousness, the very thing which the gospel promises that we already possess fully and completely in Christ.

Final Thoughts

In conclusion, let us meditate on the wonderful promise that in Christ we possess all of His riches, not just one or two of them. Do we try to imitate Him? Yes—not merely as our moral example, the way Greek sailors may have venerated Neptune, or Greek philosophers venerated Aristotle's ethics, but as our indwelling Head. As the little brother stands in awe of his elder sibling, let us imitate our Elder Brother because of the

fact that through His incarnation, death, resurrection, ascension, and mediation, we are flesh of His flesh and bone of His bone. For “*both the one who makes men holy and those who are made holy are of the same family*” (Hebrews 2:11).

The call to the converted, therefore, is not, “Come to Christ; only He can give you the power to live the abundant Christian life!” Rather, it is, “Come to Christ; only He can be your abundance”, as the Father has only “*blessed us with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places in Christ*” (Ephesians 1:3).

When Self-Confidence is Lethal

By Greg Gilbert

I have a teenage son who plays basketball. Recently, his coach recommended that he start going to the gym and lifting some light weights. So occasionally my son has been accompanying me to the gym where I'm a member and doing workouts with me. But here's the thing: my son isn't a member of the gym. When we walk up to the desk, *I'm* the one who calls up the membership information on my smartphone and buzzes us into the gym. And when I do, I point to my son and explain that he's with me, and the attendant nods



and waves us through.

Once that's done, though, my son is free to do anything I'm free to do in the gym. Whatever equipment I'm authorized to use by virtue of my paid membership, he's authorized to use because he's there with me. Whatever privileges I have—to use the locker room, the pool, the weights, the basketball court—he shares them all *because he's with me*. I have access to the gym by right of a paid membership; he has access to it not at all by right but by virtue of his relationship with me. What does all this have to do with your assurance of salvation? Everything in the world.

Confidence in Christ

Take a look at Hebrews 10:19-22:

“Therefore, brothers, since we have confidence to enter the holy places by the blood of Jesus, by the new and living way that he opened for us through the curtain, that is, through his flesh, and since we have a great priest over the house of God, let us draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith, with our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water.”

This passage is all about having access to God's presence—that is, having a right to stand before Him. Thus, the author of Hebrews writes that we as Christians should “have confidence” to enter into God's presence, and we should “draw near” to Him, not with an “evil conscience”—that is, with fear that we don't belong or that we'll be cast out—but “in full assurance of faith.” That's the goal—to stand in the presence of God and enjoy His blessings with full assurance and confidence that we *belong* there.

Our confidence and assurance that we can enter God's presence... are actually *created* by recognizing that our access to Him is based not at all on anything in us or about us. But did you see how that kind of assurance and confidence is created? It would've been easy enough for the author to write, “We draw near with the confidence of a paid mem-

bership, with the full assurance that we've done what's necessary to earn access to the presence of God." But he didn't write that. Instead the author mentions three reasons why we can have this kind of confident assurance to stand in God's presence without fear.

First, we have this confidence "by the blood of Jesus"; second, "by the new and living way that he opened for us through the curtain"; and third, because "we have a great high priest over the house of God." All three of those reasons for confidence—Christ's blood, the torn curtain of the temple, and Christ's role as great high priest—have to do with Jesus' death in the place of His people.

Do you see the point the author of Hebrews is making? Our confidence and assurance that we can enter God's presence—that we can in fact stand before Him with no fear of being thrown out—are actually *created* by recognizing that our access to Him is based *not at all* on anything in us or about us, but rather on Jesus Christ's work *for* us.

Full Assurance

This is a critical point to grasp in our fight for assurance. Most Christians would readily affirm that our right to enter the presence of God, to draw near to Him, was won for us by Christ in His life, death, and resurrection. That's not what causes our problems.

Our trouble begins when we ask, "Well, okay, but how can I draw near to God *in confidence, with full assurance?*" And for many of us, the answer that lurks in the back of our minds is that even if Jesus has brought us into the presence of God, we dare not enjoy being there, or have any assurance of the appropriateness of our being there, or have any sense of the safety and rightness of our being there unless we now earn it ourselves.

Jesus may have gotten us here, we think, but now we need to prove we belong. But do you see how these verses from Hebrews 10 cut hard against that way of thinking? Jesus doesn't barely sneak us into the presence of God; it actually gives us every right in the universe to be there—

and to be there with confidence and joy. And therefore the work of Christ on our behalf actually creates confidence and assurance; it is a *source* of assurance. The more we understand it, embrace it, and cherish

“We *should* stand in God’s presence with confidence and assurance, he says, but not because we’ve paid our own dues...”

it, the greater our sense of confidence and assurance will be.

Our confidence that we belong in the presence of God is not self-confidence; it’s Christ-confidence. The fact is, our minds and hearts will always look for a way to find *self*-assurance. More than anything else, we desperately want to justify our presence before God’s throne, to show the universe and

maybe even God Himself that even if we’re saved by grace, God ultimately made a good choice. We want to make it clear that we belong, and *then* we’ll stand in God’s presence with confidence. But the author of Hebrews rules that kind of thinking right out of bounds.

We *should* stand in God’s presence with confidence and assurance, he says, but not because we’ve paid our own dues or proved our own mettle. We stand there with confidence solely because of what Jesus has done for us. Our confidence that we belong in the presence of God is not *self*-confidence; it’s *Christ*-confidence.

Union with Christ

By Richard Gaffin



The expression “union with Christ” refers the believer’s solidarity or association with Christ, by the Holy Spirit and through faith, by virtue of which

believers partake of His saving benefits.

This article explores the meaning and significance of union with Christ in its various dimensions and concludes with a brief examination of two related questions: union with Christ as it relates to the unity of the history of salvation and to the believer’s justification.

Union with Christ: An Overview

While the expression “union with Christ” does not occur in the Bi-

ble, it describes the fundamental reality of the salvation revealed there, from its eternal design to its eschatological consummation.

Human beings are created in God's image, to live in fellowship and communion (covenant) with God, trusting His promises and obeying His commands, loving and being loved. Sin, however, has destroyed this fellowship bond by rendering humanity both guilty and corrupt, alienated from God and deserving death. In response, God, as Savior, has undertaken to restore and perfect the life and communion lost. This saving purpose, intimated already in Genesis 3:14-15, unfolds toward its fulfillment primarily through God's ongoing dealings with Israel as His covenant people.

This covenant bond between God and Israel is expressed in various ways, but perhaps most evocatively in the description of God Himself as their "portion" (Psalm 73:26; 119:57; Jeremiah 10:16). Reciprocally—within the fellowship bond of the covenant—Israel is "the Lord's portion" (Deuteronomy 32:9; Isaiah 53:1), "Therefore I will divide him [the messianic servant of the Lord] a portion with the many," a prophetic reference to the Church as Christ's "portion").

The climactic realization of this covenantal bond between the triune God and His people centers in union with Christ. The Emmanuel principle—"God with us"—that marks and controls covenant history from beginning to end comes to its consummate fulfillment in union with Christ.

This union finds its most prominent New Testament expression in the phrase "in Christ" / "in the Lord" (with slight variations), occurring frequently and almost exclusively in Paul's letters (John 14:20; 15:4-7; 1st John 2:28). Scholarly debate about the meaning of the phrase ranges from a purely instrumental understanding of the preposition "in", to a local or atmospheric sense, and even the notion of an actual physical union between Christ and believers. In fact, Paul's usage is varied, its scope best gauged by the contrast between Adam and Christ, as the second or last Adam (Romans 5:12-19; 1st Corinthians 15:20-23; 45, 47). What each does is determinative for the destiny, respectively, for those "in

Him”.

For those “in Christ” this union or solidarity is all-encompassing; it extends from eternity to eternity. They are united to Christ not only in their present possession of salvation, but also in its past, once-for-all accomplishment (Romans 6:3-7; Galatians 2:20; Ephesians 2:5-6; Colossians 3:1-4), in their election “before the foundation of the world” (Ephesians 1:4, 9), and in their still future glorification (Romans 8:17; 1st Corinthians 15:22).

Accordingly, we may categorize, being “in Christ” as either *predestinarian*, or *past/redemptive-historical*—the union involved in the once-for-all accomplishment of salvation (*historia salutis*)—or *present*, looking towards Christ’s return—union in the actual possession or application of salvation (*ordo salutis*). Another way of distinguishing these different aspects of union is “the eternal, the incarnational and the existential” (S. Ferguson).

“In application there is only a single union, with distinguishable but inseparable legal and renovative aspects.”

In making such distinctions it is important to keep in mind that they refer to different aspects or phases of the *same* union, not to different unions. One ought not to think, as sometimes happens, in terms of two different unions in the application of salvation (the *ordo salutis*)—the one legal and representative, the other mystical and spiritual in the sense of being renovative, with the former seen as antecedent to the latter. To do that sacrifices the integral unity of the Bible’s outlook on the believer’s union with Christ, who can’t be “divided” (Calvin). In application there is only a single union, with distinguishable but inseparable legal and renovative aspects. At the same time, it is certainly no less important to maintain both aspects and to do so without equivocating on them—either by denying either aspect or blurring the distinction between them.

Present union, union in the actual appropriation of salvation, pre-

supposes the continuation of the representative and substitutionary nature of union in both its predestinarian and past redemptive-historical aspects. To see Christ only as a representative for those in union with Him, particularly as no more than a representative example and not also as their sin-and-wrath-bearing substitute, seriously distorts biblical teaching about the work of Christ and the bond between Him and His people.

Present union, then, may be considered as marked by four interrelated aspects: mystical, spiritual, vital, and indissoluble. Both *mystical*—a standard, classical designation—and *spiritual* are subject to misunderstanding. This view is not a mysticism of ecstatic experience at odds with or indifferent to reasoned understanding. Rather, union with Christ is a mystery in the New Testament sense of what has been hidden with God in His eternal purposes, but now, *finally*, has been revealed in Christ, particularly in His death and resurrection (Romans 16:25-26; Colossians 1:26-27; 2:2).

Certainly, the full dimensions of this revealed mystery are beyond the believer's comprehension. Involved here as much as in anything pertaining to salvation is the hallmark of all true theological understanding:

[REDACTED] the knowledge of Christ's love "that surpasses knowledge", the knowledge of what in its depths is beyond all human knowing (Ephesians 3:18-29; 1st Corinthians 2:9).
 "The climatic comparison is to the unique union in being between Father, Son, and Spirit."
[REDACTED] Ephesians 5:32 highlights the intimacy of this union ("a profound mystery", NIV) by comparing it to the relationship between husband and wife. Elsewhere, other relational analogies bring out various facets of union: the foundation-cornerstone together with the other stones of a building (Ephesians 2:19-22; 1st Peter 2:4-6); a vine and its branches (John 15:1-7); the head and the other members of the human body (1st Corinthians 12:12-27);

the genetic tie between Adam and his posterity (Romans 5:12-19). The climactic comparison is to the unique union in being between Father, Son, and Spirit (John 17:20-23).

Similarity is not identity, but especially this inner-Trinitarian analogy shows that the highest kind of union that exists for an image-bearing creature is the union of the believer with Christ, as He has now been exalted. “The greatest mystery of creaturely relationships is the union of

“As Spiritual, then, mystical union is also inherently *vital*.”

God’s people with Christ, and the mystery of it is attested by nothing less than this, that it is compared to the unity that exists in the Trinity” (John Murray). Mystical union is *spiritual*, not in an immaterial, unsubstantial sense, but because of the activity and indwelling of the Holy Spirit. To avoid misunderstanding, using *Spiritual*, capitalized, is advisable.

Spiritual circumscribes the mystery and protects against confusing it with other kinds of union. As *Spiritual*, the union involved is neither ontological (like that between the persons of the Trinity), nor hypostatic (between Christ’s two natures), nor psycho-somatic (between body and soul in the human personality), nor somatic (between husband and wife), nor merely moral (unity in affection, understanding, purpose).

Spiritual union stems from the climactic and intimate relationship between Christ and the Holy Spirit. Because of His resurrection, the incarnate Christ (“the last Adam”) has been so transformed by the Spirit and is now in such complete possession of the Spirit that He has “become life-giving Spirit” (1st Corinthians 15:45) and as a result, “the Lord [Christ] is the Spirit” (2nd Corinthians 3:17). This view—without any compromise of the eternal ontological distinction between the second and third persons of the Trinity—is the functional or working identity of Christ as exalted and the Spirit, their oneness in the activity of giving resurrection-life and eschatological freedom.

In the life of the Church and within believers, then, Christ and the Spirit are inseparable (John 14:18), and mystical union, as it is Spiritual, is reciprocal. Not only are believers in Christ, He is “in them” (John 14:20; 17:23, 26); “Christ in you, the hope of glory”, (Colossians 1:27). In Romans 8:9-10, “in the Spirit”, “the Spirit in you”, “belonging to Christ” (equivalent to “in Christ”), and “Christ in you” are four facets of a single union. To have “His Spirit in your inner being” is for “Christ...[to] dwell in your hearts” (Ephesians 3:16-17).

As Spiritual, then, mystical union is also inherently *vital*. It is a life-union (cf. “the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus”, Romans 8:2, KJV/NKJ/NASB). Christ indwelling by the Spirit is the very life of the believer: “I no longer live, but Christ lives in me” (Galatians 2:20 NIV), “your life is hidden with Christ in God”, “Christ who is your life” (Colossians 3:3-4).

Finally, union with Christ is *indissoluble*. It is rooted in the unconditional and immutable decree of divine election “in him [Christ] before the foundation of the world” (Ephesians 1:4). The salvation eternally purposed for believers “in Christ” is infallibly certain of reaching its eschatological consummation in their future resurrection-glorification “in Christ” (Romans 8:17; 1st Corinthians 15:22-23). This hope, especially as it involves the enduring, unbreakable permanence of their union with Christ (Romans 8:38-39), finds quite striking expression in the Westminster Shorter Catechism (Answer 37): “The souls of believers are at their death made perfect in holiness, and do immediately pass into glory; and their bodies, *being still united to Christ*, do rest in their graves till the resurrection” (emphasis added).

Related Issues

Two further matters may be addressed to round out this overview of union with Christ.

1. Union with Christ and the Unity of the History of Salvation

Union with Christ is present only in the New Testament. Union is

specifically with Christ as He has been *exalted*—with Christ who is now who He has become because of His incarnation and consequent obedient life, death, resurrection, ascension, and present heavenly session. As such, exalted, He is the source of all the benefits of the salvation He has accomplished as these benefits are applied to believers.

This raises the issue of salvation under the Old Covenant. How were sinners saved before Christ’s coming into history in “the fullness of time” (Galatians 4:4), before His death and resurrection—in other words, when union with Him *as exalted* was not yet a reality?

The answer lies in recognizing that union with Christ—a distinctive privilege of believers under the New Covenant—is fellowship in covenant with God in its ultimate, eschato-

“There is, then, fundamental continuity in the application of salvation...”

logical form. As noted above, union with Christ is the consummate realization of the Emmanuel reality—God with us—that has governed covenant history from its beginning. Prior to the coming of Christ and the inauguration of the New Covenant, this bond of covenantal fellowship between God and His people already existed in its provisional and less than climactic form, beginning at the fall with God’s commitment to be their God and Savior (Genesis 3:15; Exodus 6:7; Jeremiah 11:4).

Under the Old Covenant, then, salvation was by way of trusting God’s promise to be fulfilled in the future coming of the Messiah, Jesus, who “will save his people from their sins” (Matthew 1:21). So certain was the future fulfillment of that promise in Christ’s once-for-all accomplishment of salvation (*historia salutis*), that its basic benefits—both judicial and renovative—were applied (*ordo salutis*) to Old Covenant believers ahead of time; prospectively, prior to and in anticipation of the finished work of Christ in history.

So, in the New Testament we find that primary examples of justification by faith are Old Covenant believers—whether before or after the giving of the law at Sinai makes no difference—Abraham (Romans 4; Ga-

latians 3) and David (Romans 4). Further, their justifying faith is hardly something they had of themselves or in their own strength, but only because they had been regenerated by the Spirit. Both Old and New Covenant believers are “children of promise”, as both have been “born according to the Spirit” (Galatians 4:28-29).

There is, then, fundamental continuity in the application of salvation (the *ordo salutis*) between the Old and New Covenants. Under both, the benefits of Christ’s work are received within the bond of covenanted fellowship with the Triune God (cf. Westminster Confession of Faith 7.5–6; 11.6 for a helpful formulation of this state of affairs). The great, unprecedented difference, however, is this: New Covenant believers are privileged to enjoy that fellowship bond in its consummate and most intimate form as union with Christ now exalted.

2. Union with Christ and Justification

Especially since the Reformation, a perennially important issue, both in interpreting Scripture (especially Paul) and formulating church doctrine, has been the relationship between union with Christ and justification, between the participatory and the forensic aspects of salvation applied.

On the one hand, these are not merely alternate metaphors, as if one or the other may be ignored or otherwise dispensed with without sacrificing anything essential to and for salvation. But neither may union simply be coordinated as just one in a series of acts or facets in the application of salvation (the *ordo salutis*), with union viewed as following justification logically and causally as its result. Rather, as Calvin has already pointed the way, faithful to the New Testament, being united to Christ by faith through “the secret energy of the Spirit” (*Institutes*, 3.1.1) establishes the all-embracing bond within which the believer—without either separation or confusion of either benefit of the basic “two-fold grace” flowing from union—is both reckoned righteous and renewed in righteousness.

On the much discussed relationship of union and justification it

seems difficult to improve on these words of Calvin, as incisive and as they are eloquent (*Institutes*, 3.11.10):

“I confess that we are deprived of this utterly incomparable good [righteousness] until Christ is made ours. Therefore, that joining together of Head and members, that indwelling of Christ in our hearts—in short, that mystical union—are accorded by us the highest degree of importance, so that Christ, having been made ours, makes us sharers with him in the gifts with which he has been endowed. We do not, therefore, contemplate him outside ourselves from afar in order that his righteousness may be imputed to us but because we put on Christ and are engrafted into his body—in short, because he deigns to make us one with him. For this reason, we glory that we have fellowship of righteousness with him.”

10 Things You Should Know About Union with Christ

By Marcus Johnson



To some, our union with Christ is a mystery; an ambiguous thing that seems rather undefinable. In this article, we will discuss 10 things concern-

ing our union with Christ and how it affects our everyday walk with Him.

One

The Bible contains an astonishing number of terms, expressions, and images that bear witness to the reality of our being made one with Christ Jesus. In the New Testament we find literally hundreds of references to the believer's union with Christ. To cite merely a few examples, believers are created in Christ (Ephesians 2:10), crucified with Him

(Galatians 2:20), buried with Him (Colossians 2:12), baptized into Christ and His death (Romans 6:3), united with Him in His resurrection (Romans 6:5), seated with Him in the heavenly places (Ephesians 2:6), Christ is formed in believers (Galatians 4:19) and dwells in our hearts (Ephesians 3:17), and the Church is the Body of Christ (1st Corinthians 6:15, 12:27). Christ is in us (2nd Corinthians 13:5) and we are in Him (1st Corinthians 1:30), the Church is one flesh with Christ (Ephesians 5:31-32), believers gain Christ and are found in Him (Philippians 3:8-9).

Furthermore, *in Christ* we are justified (Romans 8:1), glorified (8:30), sanctified (1st Corinthians 1:2), called into fellowship with Him (1st Corinthians 1:9), made alive (Ephesians 2:5), created anew (2nd Corinthians 5:17), adopted (Galatians 3:25), and elected (Ephesians 1:4-5). Whew! All this without reference to the Gospel and letters of John! Suffice it to say, union with Christ is an absolutely fundamental gospel conviction of the Apostles—dear to them because it was so dear to their Lord.

Two

When we are joined to Jesus, we are included in the greatest mystery of the universe—the Incarnation of God. C.S. Lewis calls the incarnation of God the Son the “central miracle” of Christianity. He is right. The redemption, restoration, re-creation, and reconciliation of sinners—and all of creation besides—depends entirely on the supreme fact that God, without ever ceasing to be fully who He is, became fully who we are in and as Christ Jesus. Why did God do this? Why is it, in other words, that the “Word became flesh”? The principal reason underlying all the other magnificent reasons that God the Son united Himself to our humanity is this: that by the Holy Spirit we may be united to Christ and so enjoy His fellowship with the Father forever. This is eternal life (John 17:3).

Three

Our union with Christ is profoundly real and intensely intimate.

Union with Christ is not a sentiment, metaphor, or illustration—or even primarily a “doctrine”. Nor is it a way of speaking about something else—whether justification, sanctification, or any other benefit of Christ (even if it includes all of these and more!). Our union with the living Christ is the essential truth of our new and eternal existence. In a way that gloriously transcends our finite understanding, we are really and truly joined—*spiritually and bodily*—to the crucified, resurrected, incarnate person of Christ. There is no better news than this!

Four

Because union with Christ is so central to the Gospel, it has resonated in the teaching and preaching of the Church throughout the ages. Unsurprisingly, given the ubiquity of the theme in the Scriptures, there is a massive chorus of churchly voices who have emphasized the significance of being united to Christ. This historic theological chorus includes the likes of Irenaeus, Athanasius, Augustine, Cyril of Alexandria, Bernard of Clairvaux, Martin Luther, John Calvin, John Cotton, and Jonathan Edwards (to name but a few).

According to Calvin, our union with Christ is to be accorded “the highest degree of importance.” Why? Because being joined to Jesus is the *whole point* of the gospel: “For this is the design of the gospel, that Christ may become ours, and that we may be in-grafted into his body.”

Five

Justification is a magnificent *benefit* of being united to Christ. We are not united to Christ because we have been justified. It is quite the other way around: we are justified because we have been united to Christ, who is *Himself* our justification (1st Corinthians 1:30). We receive Christ’s benefits precisely and only because we receive Christ. Martin Luther knew this well: “But so far as justification is concerned, Christ and I must be so closely attached that He lives in me and I in Him. What a marvelous way of speaking! *Because He lives in me*, whatever grace, righteousness, life, peace, and salvation there is in me is all Christ’s;

nevertheless it is mine as well, by the cementing and attachment that are through faith, by which we become as one body in the Spirit.”

Six

Sanctification is a magnificent *benefit* of being united to Christ. Christ is our justification, and He is no less our sanctification (1st Corinthians 1:30). Thus, united to Him, we are not only forgiven and accounted righteous, we are also transformed into His holy image. In giving us Himself, Christ will no more leave us condemned and guilty (unjustified) than He will leave us corrupted and depraved (unsanctified). This is because, as Calvin so incisively put it, “Christ cannot be divided into pieces.” Jesus is not a partial Savior of a piecemeal gospel. When we are joined to Christ, we receive all of who He is for us.

Seven

Adoption is a magnificent *benefit* of being united to Christ. Christ’s self-giving is extravagant. He binds us so completely to Himself that we come to share in all that He is as Savior. The gift of sharing in His sonship (adoption) is perhaps the most extravagant gift of them all. When we are joined to Christ by the Spirit, we come to share in the love between the Father and the Son—the *very same love* the Father has for His beloved Son (John 17:23). As such, God the Father loves us no less than He does His own eternal Son. This love is the love of all loves: it is indissoluble, it brooks no opposition, and is endlessly and everlastingly life giving and joyful. In Christ, we really and truly are the sons and daughters of God forever.

Eight

The Church is constituted by her union with Jesus Christ. The reality of salvation and the reality of the Church are in fact one and the same reality. To be united to Christ is what it means to be saved. At the same time, to be united to Christ is what it means to be the Church: the Church, after all, is *the body and bride of Christ*. A distinction, therefore, between a doctrine of salvation and a doctrine of the Church can only be

but artificial. There is no salvation outside the Church, historic evangelicals have always asserted, just exactly because there is no salvation outside of Christ. We are saved *in Christ*, and we are *the Church in Christ*. It is the same wonderful gospel.

Nine

Baptism is God's pledge to us of our union with Christ. In the waters of baptism, God impresses upon our bodies the truth and reality of our incorporation into the death, burial, and resurrection of the living Christ. Baptism, in other words, is a visible and tangible experience of the exceedingly good news (gospel) that we have been crucified in Christ's death and raised to new life in Christ's resurrection. Baptism is the sacrament ("mystery") of our new crucified and resurrected identity in Christ Jesus. Baptism is the "gospel in water", allowing us to experience in our bodies the truth that we are immersed forever into Jesus Christ.

Ten

The Lord's Supper is God's pledge to us of our union with Christ. In the bread and wine of the Lord's Supper, God impresses in our bodies the truth and reality of our ongoing participation in the living Savior. The Lord's Supper, in other words, is a visible and edible experience of the exceedingly good news (gospel) that Christ dwells in us and that we dwell in Him.

Christ brought us into the eternal life that He is by giving us Himself, and He continues to nourish and sustain us through His real presence. We *have* really and truly become one with Christ through His gospel, and we *continue* to receive Christ through the gospel of bread and wine that He has ordained as means of His ongoing presence to His Body and Bride. "*Is not the cup of thanksgiving for which we give thanks a participation in the blood of Christ? And is not the bread that we break a participation in the body of Christ?*" (1st Corinthians 10:16). Yes, indeed. His body and blood, our salvation.

10 Things You Should Know About Communion with Christ

By Benjamin Skaug



Communion with Christ is central to our relationship with Him.

This article will provide us with a look at 10 basic concepts that every Christian should know re-

garding his/her communion with Christ.

1. Our Communion with Christ Assumes Being in Union with Christ.

In *Communion with God*, John Owen states, “Our communion with God consists in his communication of himself to us, with our return to him of that which he requires and accepts, flowing from that union

which in Jesus Christ we have with him.”

Before we can have communion (or fellowship) with Christ, we must first be in right relationship with Him. That relationship can only come from our being in union with Christ. Our union with Christ is a mon-

“His Kingdom is now our kingdom
and His glory is now our daily
pursuit.”

ergistic act of divine grace that calls, covenantally binds, and applies all of Christ’s redemptive work to us. Through our union with Christ, we have regeneration, conversion (faith and repentance), justification, sanctification, and glorification. It is rooted in divine election and grounded in the salvific work of Jesus. For the saints of God, this binding union relationship cannot—and will not—be changed. At the moment of conversion, we are forever the adopted sons and daughters of God through Christ.

2. Our Communion with Christ is Our Enduring Fellowship with Christ.

Now that we are united to Christ, we are called to have authentic fellowship with our Lord and Savior. Paul reminds us that we have been given this privilege by the Father: “*God is faithful, by whom you were called into the fellowship (koinonia) of his Son, Jesus Christ our Lord*” (1st Corinthians 1:9). We have not been called into the type of union whereby two strangers are dwelling together under the same roof. Rather, we are called into a sweet and intimate type of *koinonia*, in which our lives are necessarily interwoven with Christ. His will, plans, and affections must grow into and become our will, plans, and affections. His Kingdom is now our kingdom and His glory is now our daily pursuit.

In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus told His disciples that they are to put away the normal worries of this world and “*seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be added to you*” (Matthew 6:33). As King Jesus builds His kingdom, part of our com-

munion with Him is our joining with Christ to seek and pursue His kingdom.

3. Our Communion with Christ is Fueled By Our Love for Christ.

The greatest command in Scripture is to *“love the Lord your God with all of your heart and with all of your soul and with all of your mind”* (Matthew 22:37). This command certainly applies to our love of Jesus Christ: *“Whoever loves father or mother more than me is not worthy of me, and whoever loves son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me”* (Matthew 10:37). Our love for Christ must be our greatest desire as we live out our communion with Him, since it drives and shapes our side of the fellowship. Just as God’s love for us was demonstrated in the Father’s sending of the Son to save sinners (Romans 5:8), and the Son’s love for us was seen in His laying down His life for the people of God (John 15:13), so too our love for Christ synchronizes our lives as we seek deeper and more intimate communion with Him.

“We need to learn to hate sin because God hates sin.”

4. Our Communion with Christ is Celebrated through Our Obedience to Christ.

In John 14, Jesus points out that our love for Christ is displayed in our obedience to God. He says, *“If you love me, you will keep my commandments”* (John 14:15) and *“Whoever has my commandments and keeps them, it is he who loves me. And he who loves me will be loved by my Father, and I will love him and manifest myself to him”* (John 14:21).

Paul reminds us that through our being baptized into Christ Jesus (union with Christ) that we are also baptized into Christ’s death, burial, and resurrection (Romans 6). Since Christ was raised, we too are made alive in Christ in order to live to God in obedience (Romans 6:8-10). By the grace of God (Romans 6:14), believers are called and equipped to

“present yourselves to God as those who have been brought from death to life, and your members to God as instruments for righteousness” (Romans 6:13). Thus, as we seek to deepen our fellowship with Christ, we must be willing to live a life of daily obedience. Now that we are united to Christ, we are called to have authentic fellowship with our Lord and Savior.

5. Our Communion with Christ is Impeded by Our Sin.

While our union with Christ cannot be hindered or broken, the sweetness and intimacy of our fellowship with Christ can be hampered through sin. Much like a marriage can be hurt when a covenant partner commits wrong, so too can our communion with Christ suffer when we fail to demonstrate our love to Him through obedience. Each moment of willful sin can erode and chip away at our communion with Christ: *“If we say that we have fellowship with him while we walk in darkness, we lie and do not practice truth”* (1st John 1:6).

Moreover, when we sin against the God of perfect holiness, He will bring loving discipline as a Father to a son: *“My son, do not regard lightly the discipline of the Lord, nor be weary when reproved by him. For the Lord disciplines the ones he loves, and chastises every son whom he receives”* (Hebrews 12:5-6).

So how can Christians enjoy communion with Christ this side of glorification knowing that our sin harms the tenderness of the relationship? We need to learn to hate sin because God hates sin. We have to remember that just as Christ has made us alive together with Him in His resurrection, He has also baptized us into His death (Romans 6:3). This means that we are no longer bound to our former fallen natures as the old self has died to sin (Romans 6:2), been buried in Christ’s burial (Romans 6:4), and crucified in Christ’s crucifixion so that we are no longer enslaved to sin (Romans 6:6). In other words, we should *“consider ourselves dead to sin”* (Romans 6:11) because sin is no longer our goal. Rather, our new goal is to live for Christ’s glory in righteousness

(Romans 6:19). By the power of the Holy Spirit indwelling us, we can say no to sin and walk in obedience.

6. Our Communion with Christ is Re-energized through Our Repentance.

When we sin, we distort our communion with Christ. However, when we authentically repent of our sin and seek forgiveness, God is faithful to forgive us: *“If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness”* (1st John 1:8-9). This repentance is not the initial repentance of sin that takes place in our union with Christ (we understand that all of the sins of the people of God are forgiven at the moment of conversion: faith and repentance). Rather, this is the repentance of sin that understands that our continued iniquities hurt our communion with Christ. Thus, with hurting hearts and authentic sorrow, we seek a mended fellowship with Christ through the confession and repentance of sin.

7. Our Communion with Christ is Grounded in Our Commitment to the Word of God.

We cannot love that which we do not know. Moreover, as sinful creatures, we can love the *idea* of someone more than we love the *actual person*. This must not be the case in our communion with Christ. God has uniquely revealed Himself to us through His word. Thus, if we are to sincerely know the Lord whom we are united to, then we must be committed to the study of God’s word.

The Bible communicates who Christ is: He is the Son of God (Matthew 8:29), the revelation of the Father (Hebrews 1:3-4), the Lamb of God (John 1:29), the Root of David (Revelation 5:5), Immanuel (Matthew 1:23), our bridegroom (Matthew 9:15), the “I Am” (John 8:56-58), our Redeemer (Romans 3:24), the seed of the woman, the Good Shepherd (John 10:11), our propitiation (1st John 2:2), and our great high priest (Hebrews 4:14-16). All of these names and titles are found in

the word of God and await the adopted child of God who seeks to understand Christ. As we grow in our understanding of Christ, we also grow in our fellowship with Him.

8. Our Communion with Christ is Demonstrated through Our Love and Service to Others.

“A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another: just as I have loved you, you also are to love one another. By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another” (John 13:34-35). Certainly, our communion with Christ is a private and intimate matter. But there is a large portion of it that is public and authentically demonstrated (avoiding the heart of hypocrisy; see Matthew 6:1-8) by our love for others. Since we are called to love God and love the things/people that He loves, then we are also called to love people. In fact, Jesus says that loving God and neighbor are the two commandments which the entire law and prophets depend upon (Matthew 22:37-40). Put another way, no one can love God and fellowship with Christ without loving others. Thus, our true love, devotion, and service to others in the name of Christ is an authentic demonstration of our communion with Christ.

9. Our Communion with Christ is Tested through Persecution and Suffering.

Every authentic believer will face suffering and persecution because of Christ: *“Remember the word that I said to you: ‘A servant is not greater than his master.’ If they persecuted me, they will also persecute you”* (John 15:18). Peter reminds us that these ordeals are tests: *“Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery trial when it comes upon you to test you, as though something strange were happening to you”* (1st Peter 4:12). Our union with Christ ensures that we will suffer and these moments of suffering are tests of our communion with Christ.

When we suffer as believers, we have a few options concerning our response. We can suffer with a hard heart and complain against God,

grumble against Him, and question His sovereignty in our lives. This approach will not enhance our communion with Christ. Or we can cry out to God, lean upon Him, trust Him, and depend upon Him to deliver us from or persevere us through our sufferings. This later approach will improve our communion with Christ since it brings increased trust and communication with Him.

10. Our Communion with Christ is Strengthened through Consistent Prayer.

Prayer is our opportunity to communicate with God through Christ. While forsaking prayer does not break our union with Christ, it certainly harms our fellowship with Him. When a marital partner neglects the other through a failure to communicate, the relationship is hindered. On the other hand, when husbands and wives communicate positively with one another in consistent patterns, then the marriage is enhanced. The same holds true for our communication to Christ through prayer. When we pray, we tend to feel more connected to Christ. Through prayer we can seek God's: wisdom, protection, healing, will, counsel, direction, abundance, closeness, and sanctification in our lives (and those of others). All of our godly communication with Christ through prayer greatly strengthens our communion with Him.

Union with Christ When You Don't Fit In

By Heather Nelson



Social shame asks the questions: *Where do I belong? Who am I? Who are my people? Who can be trusted?* None of these questions can or will be answered perfectly by any person, place, community, or church. Your experience tells you this truth. But the truth is that in order to be in safe, secure relationships within safe and secure communities and churches, someone has to go first. Someone has to take the risk, the plunge, into vulnerability. It's the only hope of connection. I cannot empathize with pain that I do not know about—that you have hidden from me or others. One troubling aspect of the modern-day church in America is that there are few

people who are brave and courageous enough to risk going first (which contributes to the church's reputation as a community where it's not safe to be real and vulnerable). The trailblazer always has a more difficult time than those who follow.

The problem then is how will you have courage to be the trailblazer, to pioneer your way forward past the relational barriers shame creates between us, barriers of fear and insecurity and people-pleasing? There is only one I know who can make us brave enough for such a task—who can give us the honor and secure belonging we desire. He is the one who made the way for us to return to God—who repaired the sin-broken trail of relationship to God through His life, death, and resurrection on our behalf. Jesus said, *"I am the way, and the truth, and the life"* (John 14:6), and then did the impossible so that we could live courageously in relationship with God and lead the way in restoring relationships with others. Jesus was excluded by all and abandoned by His friends in a time of need so that we could always be welcomed into relationship. At His greatest hour of pain and separation, even God the Father turned His back on Him. God's *"Beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased"* became the one who alone cried out, *"My God, my God! Why have you forsaken me?"* (Matthew 3:17; 17:5; 27:46). God rejected Jesus in a moment of agony on the cross in order that we would be eternally embraced through faith in this sacrificed Savior.

Jesus' closest friends on earth—His disciples—abandoned Him when they fell asleep during His hour of greatest need, and then fearfully fled as soon as He was arrested. Trailblazing the way to salvation was a lonely path, filled with social shame, as Jesus was repeatedly rejected and abandoned. Jesus is ready and waiting for you to call on Him.

He is Quick to Answer

What motivated Him? It was love and joy. Hebrews talks about *"the joy that was set before him"*, which helped Him to *"endure the cross, despising the shame"*, and which led Him to the victorious, secure place where He *"is seated at the right hand of the throne of God"* (Hebrews

12:2). This throne is described no longer as a throne of judgment, but a throne of grace—where we may receive help in our time of need (Hebrews 4:16). And, oh, how we need help! How needy we are! We need grace to first admit how much we need it. Ephesians 2:8 says that even this is a gift of God—faith to believe in grace. And we need courage to believe we have the grace for which we ask.

When you cry out to this Savior—this made-vulnerable-to-you One—He is quick to answer. There is no waiting for a response, as we must do with every other person. Even the most attentive friend, spouse, roommate, or parent is not available 24/7. God gives us the Holy Spirit through Jesus, who is interceding for us even when we sleep (Romans 8:26-27; Hebrews 7:25). Jesus is ready and waiting for you to call on Him.

This perfect love begins to drive out your fear of shame. That's what social shame is at its core. It is fear of being shamed, of experiencing relational rejection or exclusion. Andy Crouch writes, "Shame is always seen and recognized by the community. Social shame, as well as honor, is all too obvious to all concerned."¹ Add to this Ed Welch's words in *Shame Interrupted*: "At the very heart of shame is the absence of relationships, the absence of being known, personal isolation."² God never excludes you, but is always calling out for you and seeking to know you; and He has made you part of a community where you have eternal belonging.

References:

1. Andy Crouch, "The Good News about Shame," *Christianity Today* (March 2015): 37.
2. Ed Welch, *Shame Interrupted: How God Lifts the Pain of Worthlessness and Rejection* (Greensboro, NC: New Growth Press, 2012), 229.

Practical Suggestions for Cultivating Communion with God

By Kelly Kopic

Does the idea of communion with God draw you in or push you away? There is much in our lives that distracts and prevents us from experiencing genuine communion with God. Living in a fast-paced society, with endless demands and countless opportunities, can mean that slowing down to commune with God can seem indulgent, if not outright impossible. Amid our busyness, we can even find ourselves feeling guilty when we are not constantly accomplishing things.

But interpersonal relationships are not “things” to be accomplished. They are more about “being” than “doing”, and they need attentiveness, mutual exchange, and care to flourish. Relationships cannot be



life-giving sources of strength if we are not present in and to them. Communion with God is a deep need for every human, whether we acknowledge the need or not. Communion with God is how we were made to function, and it is ultimately about a loving and very present relationship with the triune Creator. Communion with God is how we were made to function.

As Christians, we are called to cultivate loving concern for other people, but this must always be understood in light of how we are drawn into a life-giving relationship with God Himself (Deuteronomy 6:4-5; 7:7-9; Leviticus 19:34; 1st John 4:19). We are commanded to love and obey God, not because God is a tyrannical dictator, but because He created human beings to be lovers and He knows what makes for human flourishing. His is the way of “life and good” as opposed to the way of “death and evil” (Deuteronomy 30:15-20).

We were made to enjoy our Creator, to bask in His faithful presence. He knows how life-giving communion with Him works, and He grieves over how sin threatens to distort our fellowship with Him. Love, even with the Creator, is meant to be mutual, not simply unidirectional: we are to listen and speak, to receive and give. Being in communion with God and with others is the key to human flourishing (Ephesians 4:32-5:1).

The Challenge

So why is communion with God so challenging? Our sin and the sin in the world destroy communion and drive us to flee from God. But we were designed to delight in our Creator, to find His presence and power as our great comfort and strength. As believers we not only have been rescued from the damning consequences of sin, but also have been invited into restored fellowship with God.

The world is still broken, and so are we. This brokenness affects every part of us, including (and especially) our relationship with God. Once we discover forgiveness and the promise of communion with the God of the universe, we are ushered into a holy sanctuary. In His divine

presence we inevitably see our sin, but we also discover the depth of His grace and the incredible truth that He desires to be with us. He desires communion with us so much that He died in order to make it possible (Romans 5:6-8).

Once we have been embraced by Christ, our vision should focus much less on our sin and much more on the riches of God's mercy and love. But how do we get to this place of restored vision and hope? It is in and through our renewed communion with the triune Creator that we experience genuine security, the intimacy of being a child of God, and the transforming power that comes through fellowship with Him. This side of glory, we have only tastes of such unhindered communion, but these tastes point forward to what is to come and give us strength for ourselves and strength for those around us.

“Biblically, there is a strong connection between loving widows, orphans, prisoners, and the poor, and loving Jesus...”

How to Cultivate Communion with God

We don't need to go on a three-day retreat or read extensive theological treatises in order to enjoy communion with God. What we do need is to learn to savor the love, grace, and fellowship of our triune God (2nd Corinthians 13:14). As we meditate on the mercy of God in Christ, we are slowly soaked in the life-giving love of the Father and the transforming grace of the Son. All of this occurs in and through the presence and power of the Spirit, who secures us in our fellowship with God.

Here are a few practical suggestions. First, cultivate a hunger for the Scriptures. Meditate on them, for here we can be confident that we discover the truth about our God and what it means to be in relationship with Him (Joshua 1:8; Psalm 1:2). Second, partake of the Lord's Supper on a regular basis, for this is a normal means of God's grace to us (1st Corinthians 11:23-26). Third, seek opportunities to care for the needy and vulnerable. Biblically, there is a strong connection between loving widows, orphans, prisoners, and the poor, and loving Jesus

(Matthew 25:35-40; James 1:27). As God's love moves through us to others, we ourselves often grow in our love for Him (1st John 4:16-21). Fourth, seek refuge in God through times of prayer. Adopted by God, we confidently approach the Father because He has "*sent the Spirit of His Son into our hearts, crying, 'Abba! Father!'*" (Galatians 4:6; Ephesians 1:3-6).

Think of a healthy relationship that you have been in or one that you have observed between others. The things that mark that strong relationship likely include care and attentiveness, time together, communication, mutual understanding, and shared joy. Human beings were created for such life-giving relationships, and they are the fuel of our souls. As a Christian, you are secure in your union with Christ, and this union makes communion with God a joyful possibility. Be assured of your union with Christ and go flourish and gain strength in communion with Him.

The Doctrine of Union with Christ

By Robert Culver



Though “nothing is more central or basic than union and communion with Christ” according to

John Murray, it is equally true “this mystery of Christ’s union with the devout is by nature incomprehensible”.¹

It is so much so that God “shows its figure and image in visible signs best adapted to our small capacity”, according to Calvin.² The importance of this union is clear in plain statements by Jesus such as, “I am in you and you in me” and “apart from me you can do nothing”. Eating and drinking the emblems of our Lord’s body and blood in the recurring ordinance of the Lord’s Supper brings home the importance of this union to those who observe the ordinance “with the understanding also”.

It is not quite correct to describe the union of the believer with Christ as an experience. It is rather a truth to be made known and by faith embraced. As stated by the learned preacher-missionary, L. L. Legters:

“When a person begins to apprehend what it means to be united to the Son of God and what he has through this union, he will at once realize that his spiritual growth depends upon a clear understanding of truth rather than an experience.”³

That Bernard of Clairvaux preached and wrote of the benefits of this union is cited by Calvin.⁴ Calvin was only one of many Protestant leaders to see the necessity of first knowing this truth, then of reflecting upon it and feeling in our hearts the comfort and power to be drawn from it. (Calvin discusses this union in over fifty paragraphs throughout the *Institutes* as well as in the *Commentaries*.)

For these reasons, wise theology and fruitful response to the revelation of this “mystery, which is Christ in you, the hope of glory” (Colossians 1:27) do not treat it as an “intellectual puzzle” to be explained. Like the mystery of the incarnation (1st Timothy 3:16), and of the Church as the Body of Christ (Ephesians 5:32), we must humbly seek to master as much as scripture makes known about it and apply the same to our lives individually as individual believers (1st Corinthians

6:17–20) and corporately (1st Corinthians 3:16, 17) as members of His Body, the Church.

False Notions of the Union

Some utterly false notions about the presence of the divine—whether person or essence—in every person are abroad and imbedded deeply in some religious movements. “New Age”-isms bid their hapless seekers to find God within themselves. The same appears in the romantic and nature English poets in greater and lesser degree. William Wordsworth (1770–1850, Poet Laureate), for example, could hold in tension the notion that human mind could be spelled with a capital M, as a name for God’s presence in man, but also “nature’s self, which is the

breath of God”, also of human “powers, forever to be hallowed” along with orthodox faith in God’s “pure Word by miracle revealed”.⁵

This union is previous to all else in the “order of salvation”, even to election.

“Union with Christ” in salvation must also be distinguished from the *logos* doctrine of universal presence of Christ in several theologies ancient and modern; also from the true doctrine of the immanence of God in all

His creation. Scripture does say God is immanent in all creation (e.g. Psalm 139:1–10) and “*In him we live and move and have our being*” (Acts 17:28). There is a divine efficiency that interpenetrates everything in all creation for God “*works all things in all*” (1st Corinthians 12:6, NASB) and Christ is said to “*fill all in all*” (Ephesians 1:23). But the scriptural doctrine that God’s elect are “in Christ” and He in them must be understood as different and special. This is rightly said to be:

“A union of life, in which the human spirit, while then most truly possessing its own individuality and personal distinctness is interpenetrated and energized by the Spirit of Christ, is made inscrutably but indissolubly one with him and so becomes a member and partaker of that regenerated, believing, and justified humanity of which he [Christ] is the head.”⁶

Identification with Christ or Forensic Union in God’s Counsel and in Redemption—to Be Distinguished from Vital, Spiritual Union

We have already noted that every aspect of the application of redemption is by grace and is “in Christ”. From the standpoint of the eternal counsels of God and appointment of the Father, God “*chose us in him* [emphasis added] *before the foundation of the world*” (Ephesians 1:4). Before Jesus came we were already “in Christ” for His name was to be called Jesus because He would “*save his people from their sins*” (Matthew 1:21). From this heavenly point of view, that union is as ancient as eternity past, presently prevails, and—according to Romans 8:11; 18–25—will never end. Yet, as the last quotation above indicates, the union is actually effected together with regeneration and faith. It is in this sense that union with Christ (“The Mystical Union”, as some tradition calls it) has a place in *ordo salutis*.

We may, therefore, correctly affirm that—in the broad sense—salvation has its origin in union with Christ in the mind of God. We were not elected one by one in isolation, either from one another or from the Son of God. Rather, “*he chose us in him* [emphasis added] *before the foundation of the world*” (Ephesians 1:4). This union is previous to all else in the “order of salvation”, even to election. Not literally, of course, but in God’s reckoning, in the history of procurement of salvation we were present “with Christ” in His death, burial, resurrection, ascension, exaltation, and seated at the right hand of power (Romans 6:1–11; Ephesians 1:7; 2:1–6; Colossians 3:3, 4).

As John Walvoord suggests, perhaps this relationship is better designated as “identification with Christ” rather than union with Him. “Hence,” says John Murray, “We may never think of the work of redemption wrought once for all by Christ apart from the union with his people which was effected in the election of the Father before the foundation of the world...we may never think of redemption in abstraction from the mysterious arrangements of God’s love in wisdom and grace by which

Christ was united to his people and his people were united to him when he died upon the accursed tree and rose again from the dead.”⁷

As elect believers in Christ we have been identified with Him at every stage of His redemptive work. We are said to be *crucified* with Him (Galatians 2:20), we *died* with Him (Colossians 2:20), we were *buried* with Him (Romans 6:4), *made alive* and *raised up* with Him (Ephesians 2:5, 6). Presently we are positionally *seated with Him in the heavenlies* (Ephesians 2:6).

We are ideally and *de jure* complete in Him, as it is written, “*And ye are complete in him*” (Colossians 2:10, KJV), defective and immature as *de facto* we are just now. As I look at myself and those I love with our syndromes of mental and physical defects—especially as for ten years I daily watched a precious wife deteriorate before my eyes, yet beholding her wavering, but unfailing, trust in God, I tried each day to see her as God presently beholds and shall bring to pass when we behold one another in the resurrection of the last day and the Marriage Supper of the Lamb for which the Bride shall have made herself ready.

The Effected Union of Believers with Christ

Now as to *inception of the relationship*, the *actual* union with Christ occurs in the history of each believer. Exactly when is known to God but not necessarily in each case to us. The hymn writers have it right. There is a moment, however, when “silently how silently the wondrous gift is given, when God imparts to human hearts” the gift of life “in Christ”. “I once was lost but now am found, was blind but now I see.” Believers are reminded that even though “*he chose us in him* [emphasis added] *before the foundation of the world*” (Ephesians 1:4), as Paul wrote, the same people were once “*dead in the trespasses and sins*” (Ephesians 2:1). “*But God...even when we were dead in trespasses, made us alive together with Christ* [emphasis added] (*by grace you have been saved*)” (Ephesians 2:4, 5; KJV). This happened in God’s time. In another epistle, Paul points out that “*God is faithful, by whom you were called into the fellowship* [emphasis added] *of his Son*” (1st Corinthians 1:9). This call is more than an invitation; rather it is a summons, like the

Lord's "cry of command", the archangel's "voice" and "the trumpet of God" on the day of our future resurrection (1st Thessalonians 4:16). It brings the one "*dead in the trespasses and sins*" to life. Jesus spoke of this spiritual call and resurrection in John 5:24-25, connecting this event with hearing the Word, believing it, and passing from death to life.

From our human point of view—another point of view also to be found in Scripture—the call of God is an invitation like the one in Revelation 22:17, "*let the one who desires take the water of life without price*" or Isaiah 55:1, "*Come, everyone who thirsts, come to the waters...without money*", etc.

John the "Revelator's" version of the invitation appears to paraphrase Isaiah's. Many of us are familiar with the "invitation hymn" and moments for "decision" at the end of church services and evangelistic meetings. Many "come to Jesus" in such a setting. Yet, in whatever setting one comes, upon reflection guided by Scripture, one must know he or she was *brought to Jesus*, even though the mind moved the legs to respond to the call to "come forward" or perhaps to apply for Christian baptism.

How is the Union Effected?

The union is effected wholly by the Holy Spirit—One who is also called "the Spirit of Christ" (Romans 8:9). Similarly, "*Whoever abides in the teaching has both the Father and the Son*" (2nd John 9; cf. John 10:38). Therefore, though in some mysterious sense the members of the Godhead cannot be separated, in another sense they must be distinguished as to peculiar office. Throughout the Gospels and the first chapter of Acts the "coming" of the Spirit is a promise. John 7:37-39 brings this into clear focus: "*Now this he said about the Spirit, whom those who believed in him were to receive, for as yet the Spirit had not been given, because Jesus was not yet glorified*". That complete glorification was future still when the risen Jesus last appeared to the disciples. They were promised, however, it would not be "*many days from now*" (Acts 1:5). During His last evening before crucifixion, Jesus spoke at length of this future event.

Let us not confuse the clear teaching by supposing some single covenant of which Old Testament and New Testament are only two administrations. He plainly said that as believers, before the closing events of His life on earth, the Spirit had already been “*with [emphasis added] you*” but when He should come the Spirit “*shall be in [emphasis added] you*” (John 14:17).⁸ Further, it was necessary for Jesus to leave as to His personally incarnate self, otherwise the Old Testament stage of revelation and salvation history would remain in effect.

He who had always been with His people and already “*dwells with you*” (John 14:17) by the special coming of the Holy Spirit would not come in this way until the *incarnate* Son should depart for heaven. Here are Jesus’ words: “*I will come to you*” (John 14:18). But it would be a “spiritual coming” for He had just said: “*Nevertheless...it is to your advantage that I go away, for if I do not go away, the Helper will not come to you. But if I go, I will send him to you*” (John 16:7). The event of Pentecost was a scheduled, epochal, “dispensational” event. The relation of believers then living and of all future believers was changed and improved. Together with the events of the previous fifty days it was and remains the hinge of salvation history.

The gift of the Spirit to the redeemed was quite as essential to the plan of redemption as the gift of the Son, as N. B. Harrison said:

“The two gifts are likened to the unfolding of the Father’s plan. Of the Son it is said, ‘When the fullness of the time was come, God sent forth his Son ... to redeem ... that we might have the adoption of sons’ (Galatians 4:4, 5). And when He had accomplished redemption, and men could be brought as sons into his family, then [and only then, not before] ‘God sent forth the Spirit of his Son’ (Galatians 4:6) to make this an experimental reality.”⁹

Near the end of that momentous day, Peter publicly explained the amazing event by tracing it to the fact that Jesus, of whose death they were the cause and whose resurrection was well known had been “*by the right hand of God exalted*” (Acts 2:33, KJV), had just now that very

day “poured out this that you yourselves are seeing and hearing” (Acts 2:33).

The Nature of the Individual Believer’s Union with Christ

There is nothing spectacular about initiation of this union. There is no shaking of the house or mighty wind. Though sometimes there is great inward commotion, more often there is an immense tranquility, both of mind and body. This leads us to consider what Scripture has to say about the nature of the union. In what does it consist and with what consequences?

It is a Spiritual Union

Spiritual (a) in the Pauline sense, constituted and controlled by the Holy Spirit; (b) as opposed to physical or natural; (c) as opposed to a moral union of love or sympathy; (d) as opposed to union of essence; or (e) as opposed to sacramental union as held by Roman Catholic dogma and some Lutherans. Let us consider each of these points briefly.

Firstly, we’ll consider (a) the Pauline sense. Paul said, “*You, however, are not in the flesh but in the Spirit, if in fact the Spirit of God dwells in you*” and “*Anyone who does not have the Spirit of Christ does not belong to him*” (Romans 8:9). Also, in Ephesians 3:16 Paul affirms that we receive strength “*with power through his Spirit in your inner being*” and in verse 17, “*that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith*”. So as the “spiritual body” of the resurrection is a body of flesh and bone empowered and directed by God’s Spirit, a “spiritual” person is one so directed and controlled by the Spirit (1st Corinthians 2:13, 15, 16; see also 1st Corinthians 12:13; 1st John 3:24; 4:13). A spiritual union is a union of the believer’s spirit with Christ in virtue of the indwelling Spirit of Christ.

Next, let us consider (b), it is not that natural creaturely connection every human being has with the Creator by virtue of each being God’s creation and object of preservation and providence. People everywhere are vaguely aware of this *concursum* inasmuch as Paul spoke of this as already known to the pagan Greeks at Athens—“*In him we live and move*

and have our being as even some of your own poets have said" (Acts 17:28, 29), "*in him all things hold together*" (Colossians 1:17).

And to the next point: (c) it is not a natural union such as various philosophers propose. In the view of G. W. Hegel (1770–1831): "Spirit... signifies not a metaphysical ghost, but that totality which is realized in each individual thing."¹⁰ In several varieties of personalism from the *logos* philosophy of Heraclitus (480–410 B.C.), Anaxagoras (500–430 B.C.) and Protagoras (480–410 B.C.) the "reason" or *logos* in each of us is a fragment of the divine *logos* (reason, word, logic, mind) which permeates every man—on to Rudolph Lotze (1808–1881) for whom the universe is a connected whole, by individual miracles, with the Monad.

Which brings us to point (d), it is not a union of mere sympathy, common love or loyalty, such a unity as the first believers of Jerusalem are said to have had: "[T]he company of those who believed were of one heart and soul...they had everything in common" (Acts 4:32). Nor is it like the union of soldiers who go through a long series of battles together, a nation that unites against some common enemy, such as the British displayed in World War II. The unity of believers in Christ in the Upper Room discourse is of a far deeper sort, illustrated (not identical with) by the inter-participation of the Father and the Son: "*That they all may be one; as thou, Father, art in me...that they also may be one in us*" (John 17:21, KJV).

And finally, we consider point (e): nor is it a union of essence or substance. There is a streak of this false doctrine in Eastern Orthodoxy whereby the mystical tendency in oriental (i.e. Eastern) thought grasps the phrase "*partakers of the divine nature*" (2nd Peter 1:4) and develops out of it an ascetic, mystical theology. Salvation reaches climax, it is said, in *enosis* (union) with God or *theosis* (deification).

In the context of 2nd Peter 1:4, the ascent of the soul is not *mystical*, but practical and ethical, from root in faith developing through virtue, knowledge, temperance, endurance, godliness and brotherly kindness to love (1st Peter 1:5–7). The "*partaking of the divine nature*" issues from "*God's precious and very great promises*" (2nd Peter 1:4). The pur-

pose of the promises, says Peter, is for us to have “*escaped from the corruption that is in the world because of sinful desire*” (2nd Peter 1:4). The “promise” relates not to a “beatific vision” as climax to a life of moral and spiritual effort or self-denial but to the experience of the new birth: “*if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation*” (2nd Corinthians 5:17); “*we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus*” (Ephesians 2:10). Though there is a “mystical union” and some speak correctly of “identification with Christ” in His death, burial, resurrection, etc., meaning a forensic union, yet as L. Berkhof warns, it is a “dangerous error” to assert it is “a union of essence, in which the personality of the one is simply merged into that of the other”.¹¹ The union Jesus described in John 14:23, “*we [the Son and the Father] will come to him and make our home with him*”, is entirely beyond our ability to explain—like all supernatural events.

The ascent is not to the solitary beatific vision of asceticism but to love of both man and God as a climax to growth in the company of other people. Nor is it a sacramental union, wherein by an ecclesiastical ceremony such as baptism or by consuming the *emblems* of our Lord’s body and blood, faithful believers receive direct spiritual nourishment from the real presence of Christ’s body and blood, whether in or with the elements (some Lutheran doctrine) or their real presence by mystic transformation of the elements (as in Roman Catholic doctrine). Both theories lack the support of Scripture and contradict the fact that the physical body of Christ is in heaven, where His local physical presence shall remain, as Peter said, “*until the time for restoring all the things about which God spoke by the mouth of his holy prophets*” (Acts 3:21).

It is a Supernatural or Mystical Union—If Properly Defined¹²

We relate the idea of mystical to the word mystery in the New Testament, *not to mysticism*. “Mystical” is shorthand for something which “*no eye has seen, nor ear heard, nor the heart of man imagined...revealed to us through the Spirit*” (1st Corinthians 2:9, 10). The specific scriptural basis usually cited is Colossians 1:24–29. Parallel texts in two of Paul’s

other letters (Ephesians 3:1–10 and Romans 16:25–26) should be read with the text of Colossians. The mystery in each of the three passages has to do with something unknown in former ages—that sometime in the future (the present age) Jews and Gentiles would be undifferentiated as members of one Body and that therefore a mission was mounted to let all the peoples of the whole world know about it.

Hence “Christ in you” (Jews and Gentiles individually as saved persons and collectively as the Church or Body of Christ) is the mysterious (till now) union.¹³ L. Berkhof modifies this explanation: “Subjectively the union between Christ and believers is effected by the Holy Spirit in a mysterious and supernatural way, and for that reason is generally designated as the *unio mystica* or mystical union.”¹⁴

A. H. Strong prefers to call it “an inscrutable union”, cautioning, “If we call it mystical at all it should be only because, in the intimacy of its communion and in the transforming power of its influence, it surpasses any other union of souls we know, and so cannot be fully described or understood by earthly analogies.”¹⁵

The mystery of this union of the believer individually and of the Church collectively—both the living and the dead—has some of the same indescribable mystery about it as the union of Father and Son in the Trinitarian relationship. I well remember my own puzzlement when I first heard the doctrine preached as a young adult. The preacher was no less than L.L. Legters, one of the founders of what became Wycliffe Translators and the related enterprises now putting the Bible in dozens of languages around the world. He dragged a large leafy grapevine to the pulpit, tried to tear it apart and could not, explaining the unique intertwining of branches with the main stock. Then turning to John 17 (the union of Father and Son) and John 15 (the Parable of the Vine and Branches) he drew the lesson: “*Without me you can do nothing*” (John 15:5).

Yet, neither Legters nor any other theologian can explain this union¹⁶ In addition to these two analogies Scripture also compares the union to that of the holy temple of God. Believers are the stones of which it

is built; Jesus Himself is “the chief corner stone”; “apostles and prophets” were its foundation; and God Himself its resident (Ephesians 2:20–22; 1st Peter 2:4, 5). The union is like the connection of a body of many members with its head (1st Corinthians 12:2) and like that of husband and wife who are “one flesh” (Romans 7:4; Ephesians 5:22–33).

Yet, as must be acknowledged by all, we only know by biblical revelation that the union exists; it is true for me only as I believe. Yet like all truth partaking of heaven and God, “*though now we see him not, yet believing, we rejoice with joy unspeakable*”. James Montgomery Boice commented on these illustrations as follows:

*In each of these cases the central idea is the same: permanence. Because Jesus is the foundation and is without change, all that is built upon him will be permanent also. Those who are Christ’s will not perish but will endure to the end.*¹⁷

Because of the danger of being understood in the context of ascetic mysticism, the term “mystical union” should not be used, I think, unless with careful explanation. I have introduced the “mystical” only to inform the reader how, when the term is met in discourse, one should understand the term. For us it has none of the connotation found in asceticism and mysticism as an approach to salvation.

It is a Vital Union

That is another way of saying it is an organic union. One member of such a living body has organic—that is, reciprocal—relation to every other member-organ as well as to the whole. “*God gave us eternal life, and this life is in his Son. Whoever has the Son has life*” (1st John 5:11, 12). In Christ’s Body one is not a replaceable part but of the essence, not merely juxtaposed to one another with Christ the chief engineer and architect. Christ works “on” us from within, as the lifeblood, so to speak, of each of our spirits. We have “*come to fullness of life in him*” (Colossians 2:10, RSV).

It is a Complete Union

This union is a *complete union* of the believer’s whole being, body

and soul, with his Lord. When the Spirit of God indwells me He dwells in all of me. This truth is the basis of one of Paul's most earnest exhortations. Many of the Corinthian believers had each harmed himself (not the Church, *per se*)—as in our time, the loose mores of the ambient heathenism had found answer in the lusts of the flesh with the result of fornication (sexual immorality) in more than one Corinthian Christian. Paul addressed forty-eight verses in the heart of the first epistle to this problem and brought forth this: *“Every other sin that a man can commit is outside the body; but the fornicator sins against his own body. Do you not know that your body is a shrine of the indwelling Holy Spirit, and the Spirit is God’s gift to you? You do not belong to yourselves; you were bought with a price. Then honour God in your body”* (1st Corinthians 6:18–20, NEB). Earlier it is said, *“Your bodies are limbs and organs of Christ”* (1st Corinthians 6:15, NEB). Theft or murder or covetousness, etc., as the text says, of course, are pollutions of the spirit of man, but have no debilitating effect or pollution of the body, but one can be a virgin only once. Unlawful sexual intercourse takes away unsullied purity of another sort forever—forgivable, but not restorable from the human side. David became an adulterer and then a forgiven one, and history has never forgotten the fact. Therefore the union of Christ with all of me or of you is a strong restraint against fornicating. The text of 1st Corinthians 6 provides much more of both comfort and threat for our age of the Church.

The Union is Permanent

It remains to be said that the union is permanent. The union of the Corinthian fornicator with a temple prostitute did not end his union with Christ any more than Peter's thrice denial of Christ ended his ties to the Lord. He showed up at the Upper Room on Easter evening with the other Ten. Judas had no spiritual connection and ended up in the city dump and incinerator. There is, by the Spirit of Christ, a permanent connection with the One who “lives and reigns” above, whose life is both with us and in us.

As a result, Paul argues, *“If, while we were enemies, we were rec-*

onciled to God through the death of his Son, much more, being reconciled [He holds nothing against us] shall we be saved by his life” (*en tē dzōē autou*) (Romans 5:10, ASV). The argument is from the greater to the less: before we came to Christ—long before—He died for us. It stands to reason, therefore, that now alive and able, He will rescue us again and again from our sins and backslidings. For “if anyone does sin, we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous” (1st John 2:1).

Let this article end with a singular benefit of the believer’s union with Christ. All self-effort toward transformation of character is futile. The vile pictures hung upon the walls of memory by indulgence in illicit imaginations, in obscenity, in habits of profligacy; the remorse that lingers from animosities, jealousies, ugly self-seekings—how have men sought in vain to purge their souls of these! How many suicides tell the tale of hopeless effort to be free from their relentless lashings. No, it is only the Holy Spirit of God who, coming into the life, can impart purity of mind and holiness of heart, where sin had wrought its havoc. To set sin’s captives free—this He has power to do; this He delights to do.¹⁸

References:

- ¹ John Murray, *Redemption Accomplished and Applied* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publ., 1955), p. 161.
- ² John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion iv*, ed. J. T. McNeil, trans. and ed. by F. L. Battles (Philadelphia, PA: Westminster Press, 1960), art. 17.1
- ³ L. L. Legters, one of the founders of the Wycliffe Translation Mission, *Union with Christ* (Philadelphia, PA: Pioneer Mission Agency— forerunner of Wycliffe Translators, 1933).
- ⁴ Calvin, *Institutes iii*, 2.25. [Institutes](#) John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 2 volumes
- ⁵ Wordsworth, *The Prelude*, Book v. line 45; lines 17, 221, 222.
- ⁶ A. H. Strong, *Systematic Theology* (Valley Forge, PA: Judson Press, 1907), p. 795.
- ⁷ John Murray, *Redemption Accomplished and Applied*, p. 162, 163.
- ⁸ There is some textual evidence that ‘shall be’ (*estai*) should be ‘is’ (*esti*). Bruce Metzger, *A Textual Commentary on The Greek New Testament* (New York: United Bible Societies, 1975), p. 295, states: ‘A majority of the Committee interpreted the sense of the passage as requiring the future *estai*, which is adequately supported ...’ Authorities still are not in full agreement.
- ⁹ Norman B. Harrison, *His Indwelling Presence* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1928), page number lost.
- ¹⁰ ‘Philosophy of Hegelianism’, in *Twentieth Century Philosophy*, ed. D. D. Runes (New York: Philosophical Library, 1943), p. 168.
- ¹¹ Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology* 2nd rev. ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publ., 1938, 1979), p. 401.
- ¹² There is a long history of the notion of mystical union with God or Christ supposed to be superior to the union with Christ which all believers have. For a start, read D. D. Martins short article ‘*Unio Mystica*’ in *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, ed. W. Elwell (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1984, 1991), p. 1126.
- ¹³ The above explanation of appropriation of the term ‘mystical’ in this connection agrees with John Murray’s thoughts (*Redemption Accomplished and Applied*, p. 166 ff.).
- ¹⁴ Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, p. 447.
- ¹⁵ Strong, *Systematic Theology*, p. 801.
- ¹⁶ Legters, *Union With Christ*, chap. v. ‘Scriptural Illustrations of Our Union’.
- ¹⁷ James M. Boice, *Foundations of the Christian Faith* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1986), p. 395, commenting on ‘The Mystery of the Union’.
- ¹⁸ Harrison, *Indwelling Presence*, p. 22.

Communion with Christ

By B.B. Warfield



“Faithful is the saying: For if we died with Him, we shall also live with him: if we endure we shall also reign with him: if we shall deny him, he also will deny us;

if we are faithless, he abideth faithful; for he cannot deny himself” (2nd Timothy 2:11-13, KJV).

The words which are before us this afternoon form one of those “faithful sayings” taken up by Paul from the mouth of the Christian

community and given fresh significance and force by his employment of them to wing his own appeals and point his own arguments to his fellow Christians. It is exceedingly interesting to observe the Apostle thus acting as a member of a settled community with its own standards of belief and maxims of conduct already to a certain degree established; and none the less so that he was himself the founder of the community, who had impressed on it the faith to which it was now giving expression.

The special “faithful saying” he now adduces bears in it traits which point back to his teaching as the germ from which it had grown, but also to the teaching of our Lord Himself, a witness to the wide diffusion of which in the churches it thus supplies. If the phrase, “If we died with him we shall also live with him” is Pauline to the core and takes the mind of the reader irresistibly back to such a passage as Romans 6:8; and the next succeeding phrase, “If we endure we shall also reign with him”, reminds us more remotely of such passages as Romans 5:17; 8:17; the clause which follows that, “If we deny him, he, too, will deny us”, cannot fail to remind us of Matthew 10:33, or rather, of the saying of Jesus there formally recorded.

How this “faithful saying” had been formed in the Church, whether merely as a detached gnome, or maxim, which Christians were wont to repeat to one another for their enheartening and encouragement; or, as a portion of some liturgical form often used in the church service, until its language had become fixed; or as a passage from a hymn that had grown popular, as its rhythmic form may perhaps suggest, it may be difficult or impossible to decide. The way in which the Apostle adduces it appears in any event to bear witness that the words were a current formula in the Church, to which he could appeal as such, and which would, from their familiarity and devout, if not sacred, association, appeal powerfully to Timothy’s heart. Perhaps we may venture to say that the Apostle himself felt the appeal of these devout associations, and employs the “saying” precisely because it had become by use the natural expression of his own strong feelings, at the moment aroused to a particular fervor. He, the great Apostle, yet leans with comfort on the Church’s own expression

of its faith.

What a testimony we have here to the solidarity of the Church of God; or, as we prefer to put it, to the communion of the saints. And what an enforcement of the great commands that we bear one another's burdens, that we neglect not the assembling of ourselves together, that we do not indulge the vanity of living each one to himself. The Church is ever to Paul—the inspired teacher of the Church, in a deep and true sense—the pillar and ground of the truth, on the testimony of which he gladly rests.

The purpose for which he adduces this particular “faithful saying” is to clinch his appeal to Timothy to steadfast adherence to his high duty and privilege of teaching the Gospel, despite every difficulty and danger besetting the pathway. He appears in this context to be urging three motives upon Timothy to induce him to face bravely the hardships of the service he is pressing upon him.

He points him first to the source of his strength: “*Remember Jesus Christ as risen from the dead, of the seed of David*”; keep your eyes set on the heavenly majesty of the exalted Christ, our King. Surely he who keeps vivid in his consciousness that He with whom, he has to do is the Lord of heaven and earth, who, though He had died, yet lived again, and is set on the throne of universal dominion, should have no fear in boldly obeying His behests.

Paul points Timothy next to the important function performed by the preacher of the Gospel, faithfulness in proclaiming which he is urging upon him as so prime a duty that no danger must be allowed to intermit it. It is by it that the elect of God attain the salvation destined for them in Christ Jesus. Who will draw back when he realizes that he is a fellow-worker with God in bringing to their salvation God's own elect—those elect whom God has loved from the foundation of the world, for whom He has given His Son to shame and death, and sent

“Was ever warning and encouragement so subtly blended in a single composite appeal?”

His Spirit into the foulness of men's hearts?

Surely he who apprehends that it is laid on him to carry this salvation to those whose own it is will never weary in conveying it to them. Let us learn how a brute beast may respond to an appeal to share in such a service of good by reading Browning's "How they brought the good news to Ghent." Shall we be less responsive to such appeals than even the brutes? Lastly Paul plies Timothy with this "faithful saying", the force of whose appeal lies in its subtle blending of encouragement and warning: encouragement because it tells us what a glorious prospect lies before him who gives himself to Christ unreservedly here; warning because it discloses to us the dreadfulness of the award that lies before him who is unfaithful here to the service he owes his Lord.

"We died with him, we shall also live with him; if we steadfastly endure we shall also reign with him," but also, *"if we shall perchance deny him, he will also deny us"*; though of one thing we may be firmly assured, *"though we prove faithless, He abideth ever faithful, for He cannot deny Himself."*

Was ever warning and encouragement so subtly blended in a single composite appeal? So subtly indeed that one remains in doubt whether the appeal comes to its close on a note of hope or on one of despair. Is it that God will remain faithful to His gracious purposes of love despite our weakness; that, though we prove untrustworthy, yet He abides ever trusty—is it on this note of high hope and encouragement that the Apostle's great song sinks down to rest? Or is it rather, that the God who has threatened to deny those that deny Him, will abide ever faithful to this dreadful threat, so that he who disowns Him here need cherish no hope that he shall escape the announced disavowal there—is it on this note of profoundest warning that the Apostle pauses?

The language is flexible to either sense; the context leaves the way open to either; the appeal would be alike strong under either interpretation; but it is strongest of all, doubtless, under the subtle blending of the two, to which the phrasing of the whole "faithful saying" seems to invite us.

For this “faithful saying” has the characteristic pregnancy and subtlety of all its fellows, which is the hall-mark of all true popular sayings that have passed from mouth to mouth until they have been compacted into the thought of a whole community. For its interpretation we should confine ourselves primarily to its own narrow compass and remember that the context in which it comes to us is not its own original context, and can help us to its interpretation only so far as the propriety of its adduction here is concerned. So looking at it, it is clear that much of the current exposition of its clauses falls away of itself.

For example, it seems obvious that the “dying with Christ” here adduced is not physical dying with Christ, martyrdom, but forensic dying with Christ, justification. It is clear that our fragment is a fragment of a piece in which the main theme is Christ’s work of redemption. It is especially clear that we have no right to supply “with Christ” with the second clause. It is not endurance “with Christ”, but “steadfast endurance to the end” alone that is intended, and the conjunctive preposition is left off of this verb just to advise us of that. Nor may we omit to note and give effect to the changes of tense: first the aorist, then the present, then the future, then the present again; all of which changes are significant.

Lastly, a careful observation of the consecution of the clauses will certainly bid us pause before we fall in with their division into two pairs, the first encouraging, the last warning; a division far too simple to do justice to the subtlety of the whole thought, or even the surface considerations derived from the sequence of the tenses and verbs. Let us look at the saying then a moment in its own light and then ask how it lends itself to Paul’s purpose in adducing it here.

We perceive at once that the passage consists of four conditional sentences which stand, therefore, in a certain formal parallelism with one another. The first of these sentences declares that sharing in Christ’s death entails sharing in Christ’s life.

The idea is a frequent one in the New Testament and must, indeed, in all Pauline churches at any rate, have become long ere this a Christian commonplace. The language in which it is expressed is the same as

that which meets us in Romans 6:8, and stands in express relation with that of, say, 2nd Corinthians 5:14. It would be most unnatural violently to separate the statement here from the ordinary connotation of the language. This is reinforced by the fact that the aorist tense is employed, and thus a dying with Christ already accomplished by every Christian who took this language on his lips, most naturally suggested. It is most unnatural, therefore, to understand here a dying with Christ not yet accomplished, perhaps never to be accomplished; the language implies rather a dying which has been the invariable experience of every Christian heart.

“The reference is neither to martyrdom, not yet merely to a Christian death.”

Are we to say that the passage teaches that only if we share in Christ's death in the sense that we like Him die for the Gospel, are we to share in his life? Or, are we to say that the meaning is rather that every faithful Christian that dies shall live again? The latter is too flat a sense to be attributed to our passage; the former, obviously too narrow. The reference is neither to martyrdom, not yet merely to a Christian death. The death here is obviously ethical or rather, spiritual, and yet not quite in the exact sense of Romans 6:8, but more in that of 2nd Corinthians 5:14.

The simple meaning obviously is that he who is united with Christ in His death shall share with Him His life also; that all those “in Christ Jesus” as they died with Him on Calvary, as that death which He there died, since it was for them, was their death in Him, so shall share with Him in His resurrection life, shall live in and through Him.

The appeal is clearly to the Christian's union with Christ and its abiding effects. He is a new creation; with a new life in him; and should live in the power of this new and deathless life. For there is a stress laid also on the persistence of this life and a pointing of the reader to the deathlessness of the life in Christ. “Know ye not,” says the Apostle in effect, “that if ye died with Christ ye shall also live with Him, and that the

life ye are living in the flesh ye live by the power of the Son of God, and it shall last forever?" The pregnancy of the implication is extreme, but it is all involved in the one fact that if we died with Christ, if we are His and share His death on Calvary, we shall live with Him; live with Him in a redeemed life here, cast in another mold from the old life of the flesh, and live with Him hereafter forever. This great appeal to their union and communion with Christ lays the basis for all that follows. It puts the reader on the plane—sets him at the point of view—of "in Christ Jesus".

"The companion clause presents the other possibility."

Now, the second and third clauses present the contrasting possibilities, emerging from the situation presented in the first clause, and belong as such together, as positive and negative statements. He who is in Christ may by patient continuance in well-doing abide in union with his Lord, and he shall not fail of his reward. The metaphysical possibility remains open, however, that he may deny his Lord, in which case, he shall, himself, in accordance with our Lord's own express threat, be denied by Him.

Observe the precise justice of the contrasting expressions employed in these alternatives. The tense changes first from the aorist to the present, because not the act of incorporation in Christ, but the process of steadfast endurance, is in question. The verbs in the apodosis are also varied to meet the exact case; we begin as sharers in Christ's life; if we continue steadfastly in that life we shall share in its glories. The thought is precisely that of Romans 8:16, 17; if we are God's children, we are heirs, joint heirs with Christ, *"if so be that we suffer with Him, that we may be glorified with Him also."* Only in our present passage the matter is not conceived so distinctly as suffering or as suffering with Christ; in preparation for the companion clause yet to come the idea of "with Christ" falls away here. The two cases rest with us—abiding steadfastly or disowning. The "reigning with Christ" is an advance on "living with

Christ”; it throws the emphasis on the reward: if we have died with Him we are sharers of His life; if we abide in this life we shall inherit with Him the Kingdom.

The companion clause presents the other possibility. The “deny” corresponds to “the steadfast endurance” and Christ’s disowning us corresponds to the “reigning with Him”; both as opposite contrasts. The tense is changed in accordance with the new nature of the case. It is not a matter of continually disowning Him; it is a matter of breaking the continuance of our steadfast endurance. This is done by an act. Hence the future, expressing the possibility of the act: “should we disown Him”—if we shall disown Him, why then, *He* (emphatic), also will disown us!

This is the dreadful contingency; all the more dreadful on account of three things: (1) the simple brevity of its statement as a dire possibility to be kept in mind and steadfastly guarded against; (2) the express reminiscence of our Lord’s own words in Matthew 10:33 carrying the mind back to the most solemn of associations possible to connect with the words; (3) the emphatic “He” thrusting the personality of Christ for the first time upon the consciousness of the reader; as before, He is only gently kept in mind by the implications of the “with”.

This emphatic “He” is partly due, of course, to the change of construction, by which a new subject is needed for the succeeding verb; though it would be, perhaps, better to say the desire for emphasis is the cause of the change of construction. We might have had a passive verb, “If we deny we shall be denied,” with or without the “by Him.” But the personality of Christ is too strongly felt here for mere suggestion or even for relegation to the predicate. The change to the active construction and the expression of the subject and its expression by the demonstrative “He”, all pile emphasis on emphasis; “If we disown, HE, too (not merely He, but HE, too), will disown us!” This is the climax of the sentence and a fitting pause is reached. “If we died with Him we shall also live with him; if we steadfastly endure we shall also reign with him; but if we shall ever, by any possibility, deny Him, He, too, will deny—us!”

The thought is complete with this. Both alternatives are developed.

And the effect of the whole is a powerful incentive to abide in Christ. Patient endurance— nay, bold, steadfast, brave endurance—has its reward—reigning with Christ. But if we fall from this and disown Christ, do we not remember His dreadful threat: “He, too, can and will disown—even us!”

Surely there is nothing required to enhance the terror of this situation. The poignancy of the appeal to steadfast endurance seems scarcely to need heightening. But on the other hand there would seem need for a closing word of encouragement to weak and faltering Christians. And there would seem a way open for it. For the very sharpness of the assertion that if there is disowning on one side there will be disowning on the other, too, seems to hint something else. The contrast between the present tense of the second clause expressing continuance and the tense of the third clause expressing an act, calls for consideration: “If we continue to—”, “If we shall perchance ever—”. Nothing is said of the continuance of the disowning on either side.

Disowning begets disowning. True; but is that all? Shall one act of even such dreadful sin divide us from all that we had hoped for, in a long life of endurance? What shall poor weak, faltering Christians do in that case? It does not seem impossible, to say the least, that the last clause comes in to comfort and strengthen. There is hope even for the lapsed Christian! For “though we prove faithless, He (emphatic), HE, at least, abides faithful: for deny Himself He cannot!” Deny us He may and will; every denial entails a denial. But deny Himself, He cannot. Our unbelief shall not render the faith of God of none effect.

If this be the construction, the whole closes on a note of hope. The note of warning throbs through even the note of hope, it is true, for He who cannot deny Himself must remember His threats also; and no Christian holding this wonderful “faithful saying” in his heart will fail to

note this. But the note of hope is the dominant one, and I take it this last clause is designed to call back the soul from the contemplation of the dreadfulness of denying Christ and throw it in trust and hope back upon Jesus Christ, the faithful One, who despite our unfaithfulness, will never deny Himself—will never disown Himself,—but will ever look on His own cross and righteousness and all the bitter dole He has suffered, and will not let anything snatch what He has purchased to Himself out of His hands.

In this view of the matter, then, the arrangement of the clauses is not in a straightforward quartet—two by two—but rather this:

If we died with Him we shall also live with Him;

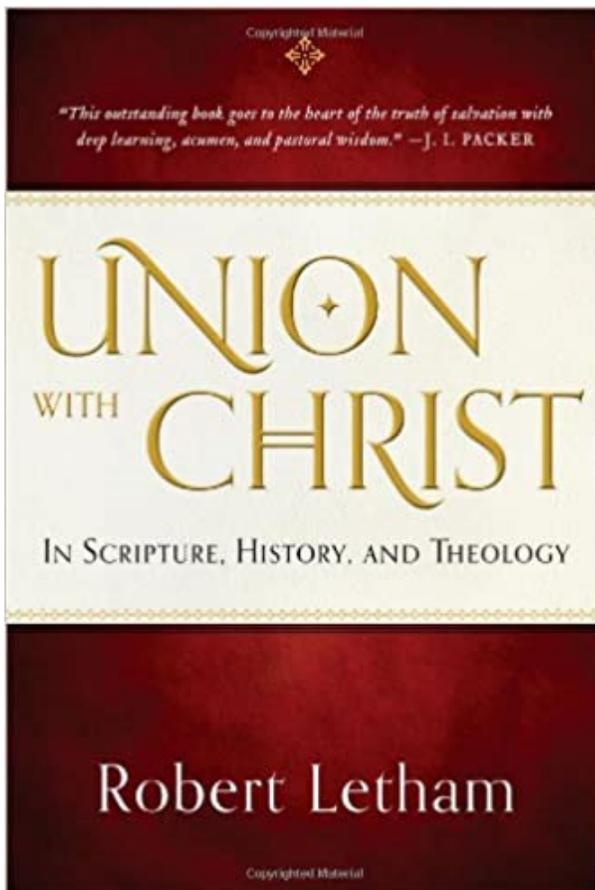
If we endure we shall also reign with Him;

If we shall deny, He too will deny us. If we are faithless, He abides faithfully, for Himself He cannot deny.

A Book Review:

Union with Christ in Scripture, History, and Theology

Reviewed By Dave Jenkins



Union with Christ is one of the most neglected doctrines in Christianity today and also one of the one of the Gospel's greatest mysteries. In his helpful book *Union with Christ in Scripture, History, and Theology*, Dr. Robert Letham notes that "Union with Christ is right at the center of the Christian doctrine of salvation" (pg. 1). Calvin agrees with this comment and notes that, "For we await salvation from him not because he appears to us afar off, but because he makes us, ingrafted into his body, participants not only in all his benefits but also in himself."^[i] The Westminster Larger Catechism describes our entire salvation as union and communion with Christ in grace and glory. Dr. John Mur-

ray considered that “nothing is more central of basic than union and communion with Christ,”[ii] for it “is the central truth of the whole doctrine of salvation.”[iii] In the words of Dr. Lane Tipton, “There are no benefits of the gospel apart from union with Christ.”[iv]

Union with Christ in Scripture, History, and Theology covers topics such as creation, incarnation, Pentecost, union with Christ and representation, union with Christ and transformation, and union with Christ in death and resurrection. Since the entirety of the Christian’s relationship with God can be summed up in union with Christ, this review could be quite long to examine everything Dr. Letham teaches in this book, but in an effort to remain focused I am only going to touch on chapter five, which I believe is the most helpful in the book.

In chapter five, after discussing the external aspects of union with Christ, Dr. Letham turns to examine how union with Christ transforms us from within. He notes that “when Christ died and rose from the dead, we died and rose with him, and so our status and existence was dramatically changed” (pg. 85). The author doesn’t stop at the death and resurrection, but continues with the ascension explaining that “following Christ’s ascension, the Holy Spirit was sent to bring us to spiritual life and indwell and renew us, our participation in Christ’s death and resurrection is vitally dynamic and transformative”.

The believer’s union with Christ will lead to our being like Christ “for it is the intention of the Gospel to make us sooner or later like God” (Calvin). The Christian is now a “partaker of the new nature”, (2nd Peter 1:4) having escaped the corruption that is in the world by lust. At His Parousia we will see Him as He is, in His glorified humanity, and will be finally and climatically transformed to be like His glorious body (Philippians 3:20-21).

Union with Christ in Scripture, History, and Theology is an important book that will help Christians to think through one of the most neglected doctrines in Christianity today. *Union with Christ in Scripture, History, and Theology* would be a good book, not for a new believer, but for the intermediate-to-advanced student of theology. *Union with Christ in Scrip-*

ture, History, and Theology is a well-written, biblically faithful, and Gospel-centered book that will help Pastors and seminary students understand the importance of their union with Christ. This book will help its readers explore from Scripture, and church history what union with Christ is and what the Church has taught on this vital topic. I recommend you pick up a copy of *Union with Christ in Scripture, History, and Theology* and learn how union with Christ is the central truth of the whole biblical teaching about salvation.

References:

[\[i\]](#) Institutes, 3.2.24

[\[ii\]](#) John Murray, *Redemption Accomplish and Applied* (London: Banner of truth, 1961), 161)

[\[iii\]](#) Ibid, 170.

[\[iv\]](#) Lane G. Tipton, "Union with Christ and Justification," in *Justified in Christ: God's Plan for Us in Justification*, ed. K. Scott Oliphint (Fearn, Ross-shire, UK: Mentor, 2007), 34.

Recommended Reading on Union with Christ

In this issue of *Theology for Life Magazine*, we've been considering the subject of union with Christ and how it impacts the life of the Christian and ministry. We understand that we haven't covered everything on this topic, but it is our prayer that—hopefully—readers of this issue of *Theology for Life* will grow in their understanding of union with Christ so that they can understand this vital doctrine.

If you've found this issue helpful and would like to study this subject further, please check out the following reading list below. These books are at the top of their genre in both excellence and readability.

- John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion* (Book 3, Chapters 1, 11)
- Sinclair Ferguson, *Paul on Union with Christ*
- Sinclair Ferguson, *Union with Christ: Mind-Renewing Foundations*
- Sinclair Ferguson, *Union with Christ: Life-Transforming Implications*
- A. Hodge, *Union with Christ*
- John Murray, *Redemption – Accomplished and Applied* (Chapter 9)
- J.I. Packer, *Union with Christ*
- Robert Reymond, *Union with Christ*
- Philip Ryken, *Union with Christ: A Matter of Spiritual Life and Death*
- Constantine R. Campbell, *Paul and Union with Christ*

In Christ Alone,

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Robert Culver

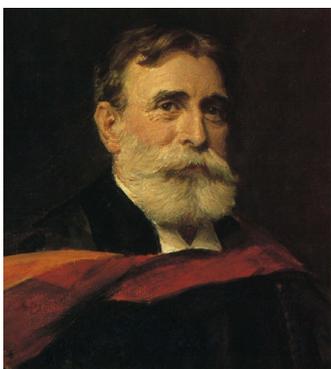
Robert Culver (1916-2015) was Professor of Theology at Wheaton College and Trinity Evangelical Divinity School. An author, preacher, pastor, and teacher all of his adult life right up until his 98th year.

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Kelly Kopic (PhD, King's College, University of London) is professor of theological studies at Covenant College, where he has taught for over fifteen years. He has written and edited over ten books, focusing on the areas of systematic, historical, and practical theology. Kelly has also published articles in various journals and books. He and his wife, Tabitha, live on Lookout Mountain with their two children.



B.B. Warfield

Benjamin. B. Warfield (1851-1921) was a world-renowned theologian who taught at Princeton Seminary for almost 34 years. One of his most famous works is *The Inspiration and Authority of the Bible*. In 1876, at the age of twenty-five, he married Annie Pierce Kinkead, and cared for her throughout the rest of her life, until she passed away in 1915. He continued teaching at Princeton until his death in 1921.

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