

Union with Christ

Understanding the doctrine of union with Christ – Part 1

INTRODUCTION: God’s eternal plan to save His people is that they should have salvation by union with the Only Begotten Son of God. “. . .who has saved us and called us with a holy calling, not according to our works, but according to His own purpose and grace which was granted us in Christ Jesus from all eternity” (2 Tim 1:9). By radical identification with Christ, our sins became His, and His righteousness became ours—a legal guilt exchange (see 2 Cor 5:21). There never was a time in eternity past when God contemplated the elect apart from their being “in Christ.”

Christ’s righteousness belongs to believers by virtue of union with Christ (Rom 5:19; 1 Cor 1:30; Phil 3:9; 1 Pet 2:24). So fully is the believer identified with Christ that what Christ earned for us is rightfully ours *as if we had earned it ourselves* (1 Pet 1:3-5; Col 3:3-4). His dying and raising is applied to us personally – it is the basis for newness of life in Him. Notice how many “in Christ” passages there are in N.T. “In Christ” is used 216 times by the Apostle Paul. All the believer’s blessings are *in Christ* as a source. (See diagram, bad tree, bad record, etc.)

I. The definition of Union with Christ

“Union with Christ is a phrase used to summarize several different relationships between believers and Christ, through which Christians receive every benefit of salvation. These relationships include the fact that we are in Christ, Christ is in us, we are like Christ, and we are with Christ.”ⁱ

II. The Biblical Illustrations of Union with Christ

How is the believer united to Christ? How have Christians died in Him? These are vital questions, needful to our being established in Christ. “Therefore, as you have received Christ Jesus the Lord, so walk in Him, having been firmly rooted *and now* being built up in Him and established in your faith, just as you were instructed, *and* overflowing with gratitude (Col 2:6-7). OBJECTION: These descriptions of the Christian’s union with Christ may sound like theological word games/jargon, but they speak of a reality central to all Christian doctrine. ANSWER: The Bible provides much for our faith and inquiry by way of illustrations of our mystical union with Christ.

The believer being in Christ is a “mystical union” because there is nothing exactly like it on earth. ***Note the following biblical illustrations of union with Christ:***

A. The relationship between stones in a building (believers) and the building’s chief cornerstone is Christ (Eph 2:19-22; 1 Pet 2:4-5).

B. The relationship between branches of a vine and the main vine itself—the main vine being Christ Himself in the vine metaphor (John 15:1-17).

C. The relationship between members of a body believers and the body's head who is Christ (Eph 4:15-16). The Headship of Christ is His Lordship over believers as Director and life of the body. Our relationship to Christ as Head is a living, growing, union. It is an organic union in which Christ Himself takes up residence within the individual. It's impossible that man can produce this union – it is not established by any religious act, including membership in a biblical church. Ex.: The pituitary gland in the head is the master gland that controls the growth of the whole body. Christ energizes and controls our growth. (See Eph 1:22, 23; 4:14-16; Col 1:18; 2:18-19; 1 Cor 12:12-27).

D. The relationship between a wife (believers) and a husband who is pictured as Christ (Eph 5:22-23; Rom 7:4). Note how marriage changes so many aspects of one's life: intimacy, legality, name change, fruitfulness, belonging, being known. The husband and wife are bound together legally. All their legal affairs are conducted in oneness. This throws light on our union with Christ as the basis of salvation. Through union with Him as our faithful Bridegroom and heavenly husband, He is able to pay the penalty which we have incurred because of sin.

There are numerous psychological and social changes as well. The wife regards other men very differently now. Old relationships change. There is a shared status with one's husband and a sharing in his station in life. Ultimately, because of union with Christ the believer will “gain the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ” (2 Thess 2:14).

E. The relationship of solidarity between the human race and Adam humanity having descended from Adam by ordinary generation and the moral/constitutional link to Adam himself (Rom 5:12-19; 1 Cor 15:22; 48-49).

F. The relationship between the Persons of the Godhead (John 14:23; 17:21-23).

APPLICATION: The believer's union with Christ is as real as if an umbilical cord were stretched from you to Christ in heaven. He is the entire source of your spiritual life. He is your life, your very viability. There would be no spiritual life without union with Him. An additional example is provided by the astronaut who journeys out from the mother ship by way of an “umbilical cord.” Union is NOT the loss of one's personality by merging into

Christ. That would be like a raindrop falling into the Pacific Ocean; it is then no longer a rain drop at all, but a part of the ocean (the error of Hinduism).

III. The Gracious Cause of Union with Christ

A. The Father's eternal counsels of redemption planned the salvation of sinners (Eph 1:4). The Son was sent to seek and to save that which was lost (Lu 19:10). "Christ did not come to represent a disjointed conglomerate of people – He came to die for those who would be saved by union with Him."ⁱⁱ

B. The sovereign grace of God alone puts us in union with Christ (1 Cor 1:30-31; James 1:18). The Father poured out His infinite grace **IN the One** He loves – that means that all of God's grace comes to us in Christ (Eph 1:6; 1 Cor 1:4, 30). This was a planned union by God's own decision. It was not conditioned upon what God saw in you, or upon what you would do (see 2 Tim 1:9; Eph 1:11, 13; Gal 2:20; faith is the instrument). "For you are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus" (Gal 3:26). Even the gift of saving faith is traceable to God's sovereign grace (see Phil 1:29; Eph 2:8-9).

C. We are God's workmanship (Grk. *poiema*) (Eph 2:10; 2 Cor 5:17). The believer is "complete" in Christ (Col 2:10). Christ is our life (Col 3:3-4).

D. The believer's union with Christ was planned in eternity (Eph 1:4). It was objectively actualized in Christ's death and resurrection (Rom 6:5). It was subjectively realized in the regenerating, baptizing ministry of the Holy Spirit (1 Cor 12:13; Titus 3:5ff.). "The flesh of Christ is like a rich and inexhaustible fountain that pours into us the life springing forth from the Godhead into itself." (John Calvin).ⁱⁱⁱ Calvin's point is we cannot share in Christ's saving benefits without possessing Him. "I am my beloved's and He is mine" (Song of Songs 6:3).

E. The Holy Spirit unites the believer to Christ (1 Cor 12:13). Union is coincident with regeneration – it takes place at the moment of the new birth (Gal 3:27). The Holy Spirit regenerates the sinner (Jn 1:12-13; 3:3-9; Titus 3:5-7). There can be no new life UNTIL the bondage of sin and self is broken (Rom 6:2-7; 2 Cor 5:14-15, 17). Christ's death and resurrection is the basis for imparting new life to the believer. His death was the judgment of our old life (Rom 6:6). Who and what we were before we met Christ was judged at the cross – the old Adamic man is slated for demolition, not improvement. Note that false forms of "Christianity" major in pious attempts to patch up and fix up the "old man." Conversely,

Romans 6:6 teaches us that victory over sin's power is by the crucifixion of the "old man" by co-crucifixion with Christ (Rom 6:11-13ff.) (a new master, a new service).

APPLICATION: The Spirit's regenerating work unites us to Christ. An unbreakable union ensues. Because of the believer's union with Christ, final resurrection is assured (Rom 6:5; 1Cor 15:22; Rom 8:17). The promise is that we will always be with Him (1Thess 4:17, 18). He who has the Son has the life (1 Jn 5:12).

Being united with Christ saves us from the PENALTY of sin, the POWER of sin, and, ultimately, the PRESENCE of sin. If a person is only interested in being delivered from the penalty of sin, what does it say about the lack of evidence that they are in union with Christ? See the verses in 1 John chapter 4 and 5 about love being the evidence of salvation. Also note the passages which teach that Christ purchased the believer's consecration – 2 Cor 5:14-15; Titus 2:14).

There is nothing that man can do to command or control the new birth. Neither baptism, nor a religious formula, nor a particular prayer, or membership in a church can eternally unite a person to the Son of God. Being united with Christ is an act only God Almighty can perform – it is not even triggered by man's action (Jn 1:12, 13; Mt 11:27; Eph 2:1-10; James 1:18).^{iv}

IV. The Dimensions of Union with Christ

A. In union with Christ by faith, there is the legal imputation of Christ's righteousness which is justification by faith (Rom 3:24-26). Regarding this new status before God of being right with His righteousness, in preparation for the new birth, the Holy Spirit works in the person He is calling a profound awareness of the fact that they have no righteousness of their own. The righteousness with which they must appear before God to be just is the imputed righteousness of Christ. Gospel faith grasps this central truth of redemption (Rom 3:26).

B. There is the feeling of dependence upon Christ in the depths of one's being. The Christian understands that all the grace he receives is from Christ, not from religious practices—nor from a transaction. The Christian life entails a spiritual or mystical participation in the graces, or qualities of Christ our "Head." As we behold Him by faith and seek to imitate Him, our souls are renewed in the image of Christ (2 Cor 3:18). Someday bodily! A complete conformity to our Head (Rom 8:29; Phil 3:21).

C. There is a social dimension of union with Christ. The unity of the saints is the result of union with Christ (Phil 2:1-2ff)—the supernatural reality of being members one of another (Eph 4:25). The unity among believers is to be a powerful, and practical unity of

mind, heart, and will so that God's loving purpose is seen by the world (Jn 17:21-23; Rom 15:5-6; 1 Cor 12).

V. The Results of Union with Christ

A. When we have been crucified with Christ, the old anti-God bias and its sinful passions has been put to death so that it is rendered powerless as a dominating force (Rom 6:6; Gal 2:20). The believer is freed from the condemning yoke of the Law (Rom 7:4; Gal 2:4). Union with Christ produces sanctification (Gal 5:24; 1 Cor 6:17-20). There will be holy progress, ethical progress. As a necessary consequence of union with Christ, we will gain an increasing knowledge of God (Col 1:9-11). We will be empowered to make headway against what remains of our corruptions, and the solicitations of the flesh (Rom 8:12-13). Eternal life is the outcome of a life of sanctification in Christ (Rom 6:22).

B. Union produces an awareness of God's presence in the heart (Col 1:27; Rom 8:14-16). There will be an experiential knowledge of God's love and the Son's grace, and the Holy Spirit's consolation and comfort (Rom 5:5). The believer will take great delight in fellowship with the Father and the Son through the Holy Spirit. Profound spiritual communion is a result of union with Christ (Gen 6:9). There will be godly fear and a profound sense of His presence. Do you think it is possible to be in union with Christ and little desire for fellowship with the Lord? Why or why not?

C. Union produces a heightened sense of dependence upon the Savior for service, for victory over sin, and for the empowerment of our spiritual faculties (Jn 15:5).

D. Union with Christ has an incredible significance for one's daily walk. Christ is the fountainhead for every spiritual blessing: repentance, faith, pardon, justification, adoption, sanctification, perseverance, glorification (1 Cor 1:30; Rom 8:29-32). No human agency can join us to Christ. Once the Spirit baptizes a person into Christ, the Lord becomes their Head and Husband. To the degree that you take seriously your union with Christ, you will give evidence by your holy walk that you are saved (Titus 2:1-10).

End Notes:

ⁱ Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, p. 840

ⁱⁱ Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, p. 448

ⁱⁱⁱ *Calvin's Institutes*, IV. 17.9

^{iv} See quote from *The Cross and Salvation*, by Bruce Demarest on the erroneous view of Catholicism, p. 317, and "Union with Christ" in Robert Reymond, *A New Systematic Theology*.