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## *The Church – Its Life and Union with Christ*

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*This paper has been revised and rewritten from the notes of Tom Ferrell, pastor of Arlington Presbyterian Church, from his series "Life Together: called into the community of faith" (June 13 and 20, 2003).*

The Church is God's idea and creation. Jerry Bridges reminds us, "God does not save groups; He saves individual people. Each of us must respond individually in repentance and faith to the gospel invitation. But though God saves us as individuals, He immediately incorporates us into the Body of Christ (Romans 12:5; I Corinthians 12:13). Every believer of every nation, race, or station in life is a member of that Body. From all over the world, God has drawn together a spiritual community whose members share a common life in Christ" (The Crisis of Caring, p.63).

The word for church in Greek is *ekklesia* (ἐκκλησία). In its Greek setting, *ekklesia* simply designates an assembly of people, whether they were Christians or not (Acts 19:32, 39). But in the Bible when the writers of the New Testament used the word *ekklesia*, they did so with its Hebrew counterpart, *qahal*, in the back of their minds. *Qahal* referred to the people of God, the congregation, assembled before Him (Deut. 9:10, 10:4, 18:16; Ps. 22:22, 25; Acts 7:38). Although *ekklesia* can be a general term used of all who believe (this is sometimes called the "universal" or "invisible" church - Eph. 1:22-23; 5:22-32,) it primarily speaks of a literal, physical, local gathering of people who profess faith in Christ. (However, it should be remembered that within the gathering of professing believers are those who are not truly saved, though they know the doctrines of the faith and conform to the external rites of the Church.) A natural question is, what is it that makes us "an assembly"? What is it that unites us? What is the most fundamental thing that we have in common?

I John 1:3 and 7 give the answer. "What we have seen and heard we proclaim to you also, that you also may have fellowship with us; and indeed our fellowship is with the Father, and with His Son Jesus Christ ... but if we walk in the light as He Himself is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus His Son cleanses us from all sin."

In these verses there are two references to our life together. In verse 3 it says, "that you also may have fellowship with us;" in verse 7 it says, "we have fellowship with one another." But both of these references to our fellowship with one another are followed by a reference to our fellowship with Christ. In verse 3 it says, "Indeed our fellowship is with the Father, and with His Son Jesus Christ." Verse 7 mentions that the blood of Jesus His Son cleanses us from all sin. We learn from this that our fellowship with one another flows out of our fellowship with Jesus Christ.

I Corinthians 1:9 says the same thing: "God is faithful, through whom you were called into fellowship with His Son, Jesus Christ our Lord."

What unites us together? What is the glue that binds us together? What is the basic thing Christians share in common? We share a common life in Christ.

In I John 5:11-12 John writes, "and the witness is this, that God has given us eternal life, and this life is in His Son. He who has the Son has the life; he who does not have the Son of God does not have the life."

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John 1:12-13 says, “But as many as received Him, to them He gave the right to become children of God, even to those who believe in His name, who were born not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man, but of God.”

Leon Morris comments,

“The word ‘children’ indicates those who share a common nature. That is what we expect in a family; it is what makes a family. A family is a group of people linked by ties of kinship; they share a common nature derived from their parents. John has the thought that believers are people whose essential nature comes from God ... he speaks of being reborn. The thought is that a divine miracle takes place whereby people are reborn into the heavenly family. In II Peter 1:4 we read of people becoming ‘partakers of the divine nature’, and it is something like that of which John is speaking here. Believers have the right to a place in the heavenly family because of what God has done in them” (Reflections on the Gospel of John, Vol. 1, p. 13). Everything else we have in common is a consequence of this fundamental spiritual reality.

The Bible also tells us that we are united in Christ. What does this mean? What kind of connection do we actually have with Jesus?

Our union with Christ has two aspects to it; it is both a *vital* union and a *representative* union.

If something is vital, like the air we breathe, it is necessary to the maintenance of life itself. We not only receive life from Christ, our life is sustained through Him as well. Charles Hodge describes a vital union as “a common life analogous to that which exists between the vine and its branches, and between the head and members of the body. The believer is truly partaker of the life of Christ” (Hodges Systematic Theology II, 698). The Bible gives several metaphors to help us understand this connection to, or union with, Christ. One (which has already been mentioned), is that of the vine and the branches from John 15. Jesus said, “I am the vine, you are the branches” (John 15:5). It doesn’t get much clearer than that, does it? Once a branch is cut from a plant the leaves began to shrivel up and die, for they had been cut off from that which sustained life. Another image is that of a body. I Corinthians 12:27 says, “Now you are Christ’s body, and individually members of it.” Again, that’s pretty plain isn’t it? All the various parts of your body share a common life. We are joined to Christ in a vital connection.

As those who have experienced the regenerating, life-giving grace of God, we now have the capacity to respond to and enjoy fellowship with the one, living and true God. We have been granted new capacities, a new allegiance, new affections, new desires, new perspectives, a new status, new motivation, and new found freedom all as a result of God’s grace. We have been made both capable and willing to submit ourselves to God. Being alive to God is to delight in Him. God, as He has revealed Himself to be, is agreeable to our souls. Being alive to God is to have regard to Him. We have a hunger for His Word and seek to conform to His will. Being alive to God is to have concern for Him. We have an interest in His honor and glory in our lives and among men. This is the life created in us by the Holy Spirit (John 6:63). This is the life sustained in us by that same Holy Spirit who indwells us. In this sense we are joined to Christ in a vital union.

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But Christ also suffered, died, was buried, and raised from the dead as our representative. We are joined to Him in this relationship as well. We call this **a representative union**.

To communicate this glorious truth Paul uses the term “for us” (ὕπὲρ ἡμῶν).

- Romans 5:8, “while we were yet sinners Christ died *for us*” (ὕπὲρ ἡμῶν).
- II Corinthians 5:21, “God made Christ to be sin *on our behalf*” (ὕπὲρ ἡμῶν).
- Galatians 3:13, “Christ has become a curse *for us*” (ὕπὲρ ἡμῶν).

Christ did these things “on our behalf.” He is acting in our place and to our benefit. His actions and the benefits derived from them are experienced by us.

The Bible also says that we are “in Him” or “in Christ”, or uses some other synonymous expression 114 times in the New Testament to express our connection to Him.

Note how the following verses illustrate that Christ is our representative:

- Romans 8:1, “There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are *in Christ Jesus*.”
- II Corinthians 5:17, “Therefore if any man is *in Christ*, he is a new creature; the old things passed away; behold, new things have come.”
- Philippians 1:1, “Paul and Timothy, bond-servants of Christ Jesus, to all the saints *in Christ Jesus* who are in Philippi.”
- Colossians 2:10, “and *in Him* you have been made complete.”

Paul uses these terms to express the idea that what took place in Christ applies to those He represents.

We can see this idea fleshed out most fully in Paul’s explanation of the representative roles of Adam and Christ in Romans 5 and elsewhere:

#### Romans 5

17 For if by the transgression of the one [Adam], death reigned through the one, much more those who receive the abundance of grace and of the gift of righteousness will reign in life through the One, Jesus Christ.

18 So then as through one transgression there resulted condemnation to all men, even so through one act of righteousness there resulted justification of life to all men.

19 For as through the one man's disobedience [Adam's first sin (Gen. 3)] the many were made sinners, even so through the obedience of the One [Christ's fulfillment of the law during His entire life] the many [us] will be made righteous.

There is a striking analogy between our fall in Adam and our restoration in Christ.

by reason of one man's offense	→ judgment came
	→ resulting in condemnation

by reason of One Man's righteousness	→ the free gift came
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→ resulting in justification

In Romans 5:19, it tells us that we were made sinners in Adam and made righteous in Christ. The word in Greek translated as “made” (*katestathesan* - καταστάθησαν) is never used of changing the nature of someone into something different than it was before. It means to be declared to be something, or to be appointed to a position, or to be placed in a category. For example, in Acts 7:35 when it says, “Who made you a ruler and a judge?” it means “Who appointed you as ruler and judge?” (cf. Matt. 24:47; 25:21; Acts 6:3; 7:10; Titus 1:5; Heb. 5:1 etc., Hodge, 173). Therefore, when Paul says that men were “made” sinners he does not mean that they were made sinful, but rather that they were placed in the same category as Adam. The same is true of relationship to Christ. Through Christ’s obedience we are placed in the class of the righteous, i.e. we shall be regarded as righteous and treated as such. It is not our righteousness that makes us righteous, but the imputation of Christ’s righteousness that makes us so (Hodge, 174).

Adam and Christ are progenitors, originators, the singular forefathers of two nations or families of men. Picture if you will two masses of humanity. In front of each mass is a great figure - the patriarch, the leader, the king, the spokesman - who represents everyone who is identified with him. Adam stands before one nation. Christ before the other. Indeed, so closely are the people identified with their representatives that they are said to be “in” them - either “in Adam” or “in Christ.” The fortunes and fate of all who belong to them lie in the actions and decisions of each of these representatives.

Those “in Adam” are tied to his fate. Romans 5:12 tells us, “Therefore, just as through one man sin entered into the world, and death through sin, and so death spread to all men, because all sinned.” Adam as our representative fell and we fell “in Him.” However, we were restored “in Christ”, the Second Adam. I Corinthians 15:22 says, “for as in Adam all die, so also in Christ all shall be made alive.” Likewise, in 2 Corinthians 5:14-17 Paul writes, “For the love of Christ controls us, having concluded this, that one died for all, therefore all died; and He died for all, that they who live should no longer live for themselves, but for Him who died and rose again on their behalf ... Therefore if any man is in Christ, he is a new creature; the old things passed away; behold, new things have come.” Christ as our representative paid the penalty for sin and fulfilled the just demands of the law and we are declared righteous as we are in Him.

Adam and Christ represent distinct nations, families, environments, worlds, kingdoms. One is the kingdom of darkness, sin, and death. The other of light, holiness, and life. The chosen of God, the elect of God, the saints, the people of God have been transferred out of one into the other. This is what Paul is referring to in Colossians 1:13-14; “For He delivered us from the domain of darkness, and transferred us to the kingdom of His beloved Son, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins.” From God’s perspective when we are united with Christ we are identified with Him in all the particulars of His dealing with sin. Romans 6:3 says, “all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus have been baptized into His death.” We were identified with Christ in His death. It is as if there on the hill of Golgotha we hung with Him. Romans 6:4 says, “we have been buried with Him.” We were identified with Christ in His burial. It is as if we were placed in the tomb of Joseph of Arimathaea with Him. Romans 6:4 says, “as Christ was raised...we, too, might walk in the newness of life.” We were identified with

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Christ in His resurrection. It is as if we arose with Him when He arose on the first day of the week (see Eph. 2:5). Ephesians 2:6 tells us that “God seated us with Him in heavenly places.”

Technically, ideally, I am seated in Washington, DC on the floors of both houses of Congress in the persons of my elected representatives. It is in this representative sense that we are to understand how we can be seated in heavenly places.

So, beloved, you are joined, you are connected to Christ in a representative union.

Because of these truths, the church is precious to God. The church is the substance of the heavenly Father’s gift to the Son. Gifts are expressions of love. We give precious things to those dearest to us. What would God the Father give God the Son as a gift to express His love? The answer is, the Church. In John 6:37 Jesus said, “All that the Father gives Me shall come to Me.” In John 17:24 He prayed, “Father, I desire that they also, whom You have given Me, be with Me where I am, in order that they may behold My glory.” “Every individual ever redeemed – everyone ever given the gift of faith, forgiven, and justified before God by grace – is a love-gift from the Father to the Son” (MacArthur, Onward, p. 9) ... However, redemption was not the Father’s work alone. In order to accomplish the divine plan, the Son would have to go into the world as a member of the human race and pay the penalty for the sin of man; and He did so in submission to the Father’s will .... “[The Church, then is] also the Son’s expression of love to the Father” (p. 11) ... I Corinthians 15:24 says, ‘Then comes the end, when [the Son] hands over the kingdom to God and the Father.’ In other words, when the Son brings the Church to glory, and the Father gives it to the Son as His eternal love-gift, then the Son will turn around and give everything, including Himself, back to the Father” (MacArthur, Onward, p. 14).

“All this means that the Church is something so monumental, so vast, so transcendent, that our poor minds can scarcely begin to appreciate its significance in the eternal plan of God. Our salvation as individuals is almost insignificant. The real aim of God’s plan is not merely to get us to heaven. But the drama of our salvation has an even grander purpose: it is an expression of eternal love within the Trinity. We’re only the gift” (MacArthur, Onward, p. 12).

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Now here’s the point that all of this has been leading to. To loosely quote A. A. Hodge: “Since all true believers are thus intimately united to Christ as the common Head of the whole body, and the Source of a common life, it follows that those same believers must be intimately united together. If they have but one Head, and are all members of one body, they must have one common life, and be members one of another. The view of Rome [i.e. the Catholic Church] is that individuals are united to the Church through the sacraments, and through the Church to Christ. The true view is, that the individual is united to Christ the Head by the Holy Spirit and by faith; and by being united to Christ he is, by the very nature of the case, united to all the members of Christ’s body, the Church ... They have a common Head and common duties with respect to him. They have a common profession, a common system of faith to maintain, a common gospel to preach, a common worship and service to maintain. They have a common life and one Holy Spirit dwelling in and binding them together ...” (The Confession of Faith, p. 324).