

THE MERCIES OF GOD: Union

“I have been crucified with Christ; and it is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me; and the *life* which I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave Himself up for me.”
~ *Galatians 2:20*

Introduction

The doctrine of union with Christ is one of the most profound and vital teachings of Scripture. When carefully traced through the New Testament, it becomes clear that salvation as a whole cannot be understood adequately apart from this union. As John Murray states, “Nothing is more central or basic than union and communion with Christ. . . . Union with Christ is really the central truth of the whole doctrine of salvation” (*Redemption Accomplished and Applied*, 171). Murray goes on to state,

It is not simply a phase of the application of redemption; it underlies every aspect of redemption both in its accomplishment and in its application. Union with Christ binds all together and insures that to all for whom Christ has purchased redemption he effectively applies and communicates the same.” (175)

As important as this concept is, the doctrine of union with Christ has often been subject to great misunderstanding. Because of its relational quality, many attempt to define it according to personal experience. Mystical forms of Christianity seize upon this doctrine and twist it to promote everything from a highly individualistic form of Christianity which has no need for the local church or doctrine, to aberrations which teach that Christians undergo deification as they are absorbed into the divine essence through their union with Christ.

The danger of falling captive to these aberrations should motivate the Christian to study Scripture carefully to understand this doctrine as God intends for it to be understood. But more than that, the reality of union with Christ has been revealed by God for the greater purpose of providing comfort and motivation to the believer as he lives out the Christian life. As MacArthur and Mayhue state, “One of the most precious truths in all Scripture is the doctrine of the believer’s union with the Lord Jesus Christ” (*Biblical Doctrine*, 602).

“There is no joy in this world like union with Christ. The more we can feel it, the happier we are.”
—Charles Spurgeon

A. Key Terms and Definitions

“Union with Christ.” It is important to begin with several helpful definitions of this “union.”

- **MacArthur & Mayhue** define union with Christ as: “A basic dimension of the doctrine of salvation: by being identified with Christ in his atoning death as well as in his resurrection power, believers are credited with his righteousness and share in his holiness” (*Biblical Doctrine*, 938).
- **Louis Berkhof** defines union with Christ as “that intimate, vital, and spiritual union between Christ and His people, in virtue of which He is the source of their life and strength, of their blessedness and salvation” (*Systematic Theology*, 449).
- **Wayne Grudem** states that 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” (*Systematic Theology*, 1256).
- Puritan theologian **John Owen** defined union with Christ as “the cause of all other graces that we are made partakers of; they are all communicated unto us by virtue of our union with Christ. Hence is our adoption, our justification, our sanctification, our fruitfulness, our perseverance, our resurrection, our glory” (*Exposition of the Epistle to the Hebrews*, 150).

Various expressions are used in the New Testament to communicate this doctrine. The apostle Paul is the most prolific, using the prepositional phrases “in Christ,” “with Christ,” and “through Christ” repeatedly. So abundant are these phrases that theologians generally agree that **union with Christ is the apostle Paul’s central theological emphasis**. As James Stewart writes, “Union with Christ, rather than justification or election or eschatology, or indeed any of the other great apostolic themes, is the real clue to an understanding of Paul’s thought and experience” (*A Man in Christ*, vii). Richard Gaffin similarly states that this doctrine is “the central truth of salvation for Paul, the key soteriological reality comprising all others” (*By Faith, Not by Sight*, 36). But Paul is not alone in making references to this doctrine. The apostle John also refers to the doctrine by his use of the verb “to abide” (e.g., John 6:56; 15:5-10) and his use of the prepositional phrases, “in Him” and “in Me” (with reference to the sayings of Christ).

Key idea:
A special work of God whereby He associates Himself through Christ with His elect, thereby becoming the source of their life and blessedness.

These prepositional phrases (“in,” “with,” “through”) show that **union with Christ is reciprocal in nature**: (1) in some cases, we are described as “in Christ” (2 Cor 5:17; Gal 3:28; Eph 1:4; 2:10; Phil 3:9; 1 Thess 4:16); in other cases, Christ is described as being “in us” (Gal 2:20; Col 1:27; Rom 8:10); and (3) in yet other instances, the language emphasizes both at the same time—Christ “in us” and we “in Christ” (John 15:4-5; 1 John 4:13).

In addition to specific terminology, various analogies are also employed by both Paul and John to describe the nature of this union. These include:

- (1) **The temple building and its cornerstone.** See Ephesians 2:19-22. According to this analogy, Christ is the spiritual cornerstone (the most important block) and believers are the blocks placed around and on top of Him. This analogy emphasizes the corporate nature of the church and its function as the dwelling place of God.
- (2) **The vine and its branches.** See John 15:4-5. This analogy depicts Christ as the stem or trunk of the grape vine and believers are connected to Him as branches. As such, Christ provides the branches with life-giving sap. In turn, they produce fruit. To not be attached to the vine—Christ—is tantamount to death.
- (3) **A marriage relationship.** See Ephesians 5:22-33. According to this analogy, Christ is likened to the husband and believers are likened to His bride. The purpose of this analogy is to emphasize intimacy, covenant faithfulness, and exclusivity. Christ loves and cherishes His bride. He will go to any length to ensure she is protected, provided for, and sanctified. He is bound to her with an unbreakable bond.
- (4) **A body and its head.** See Ephesians 1:22-23; Romans 12:4-5; 1 Corinthians 12:12-27; etc. This analogy is used most often by Paul to describe union with Christ. The purpose of this analogy is to emphasize the interconnectedness of all believers to each other, and more importantly, to their Head—Jesus Christ. As their head He provides leadership and instruction.

As already stated, the doctrine of **union with Christ is the wellspring out of which flow all of the graces of salvation**. “In Christ” believers are said to be: chosen (Eph 1:4); called (1 Cor 1:9); made alive, re-created (Eph 2:5, 10; 2 Cor 5:17); crucified (Gal 2:20); buried (Col 2:12); baptized into Christ’s death (Rom 6:3); united with Christ’s resurrection (Rom 6:5); seated in the heavenly places (Eph 2:6); justified (Rom 8:1); adopted (Gal 3:26); sanctified (1 Cor 1:2); glorified (Rom 8:30); and resurrected (1 Thess 4:16). Indeed, the Christian life cannot be conceived of in any true way apart from union with Christ.

“Such intimate spiritual union is unique to Christianity. In no other religion is the object of worship said to become the life of the worshiper. Muslims do not speak of being in Allah or in Muhammad; Buddhists never say that they are in Buddha. They may follow the teachings of their respective leaders, but Christians alone are said to be *in Christ*, united to him as their representative, substitute, and Mediator.”

—MacArthur & Mayhue, *Biblical Doctrine*, 603

B. Essential Characteristics

1. **Union with Christ is rooted in the eternal decree of God.** God’s plan all along was to save us by binding us to His Son, and His Son to us.

- Ephesians 1:3-4; 2 Timothy 1:9

Anthony Hoekema states,

Union between Christ and his people was planned already in eternity [past], in the sovereign pretemporal decision whereby God the Father selected us as his own. Christ was chosen to be our Savior before the foundation of the world (1 Pet 1:20). . . . [God] decreed that Christ would have a people who belonged to him from eternity to eternity. The chosen to be saved, in other words, were never contemplated by the Father apart from Christ or apart from the work Christ was to do for them—they were chosen *in Christ*. (*Saved by Grace*, 56-57)

2. Union with Christ is established by the atonement of Christ. The death and resurrection of Christ is the basis for union with Christ. Christ serves as our *representative head* (1 Cor 15:21-22). Since the elect are reckoned as “in Him” (represented by Him), whatever He achieved through the atonement, He achieved on their behalf.

- 1 Corinthians 1:30; 2 Corinthians 5:21; Galatians 2:20; Romans 5:5-6; Ephesians 5:23, 25

Sinclair Ferguson writes,

If we are united to Christ, then we are united to him at all points of his activity on our behalf. We share in his death (we were baptized into his death), in his resurrection (we are resurrected with Christ), in his ascension (we have been raised with him), in his heavenly session (we sit with him in heavenly places, so our life is hidden with Christ in God), and we will share in his promised return (when Christ, who is our life, appears, we also will appear with him in glory). (*The Christian Life*, 113)

3. Union with Christ is realized through the regeneration of the Holy Spirit. There was a time when believers were not “in Christ” (Eph 2:3; 11-12; Rom 16:7). Though believers were “chosen in Him before the foundation of the world” (Eph 1:4), this union was not *actual* until they were made alive.

- 2 Corinthians 5:17; Ephesians 2:4-5, 10

4. Union with Christ is appropriated in the believer’s life by faith. There are two important considerations to remember: (1) The privileges of this union are not *enjoyed* because the union is *seen*. This union and its privileges are *believed by faith* according to the promise of God. And (2) the privileges of this union are not *enjoyed* because of the *worthiness* of the believer’s *good works*. This union and its privileges are *received by faith* according to the grace of God.

- Galatians 2:20; Ephesians 3:15-17

As Hoekema states, “We can only grasp and continue to enjoy this union by faith. . . . Faith means living daily in the joyful awareness that Christ lives in us” (*Saved by Grace*, 60). Moreover, as Geerhardus Vos states, recognizing the central role that union with Christ plays in the Christian life “is the best means of protection against salvation by works” (*Reformed Dogmatics*, 4.24).

5. Union with Christ is evidenced in the pursuit of Christlikeness. Union with Christ provides the impetus, energy, and ambition for sanctification. It imparts holy affections and virtues. Sanctification is not a series of “do’s and don’ts,” but the transformation of the believer into the likeness of Christ (Rom 8:29). Spiritual union with Christ is the essential ingredient for this effort.

- John 15:4-5; Romans 6:4, 11-13 (note the “therefore”).

In light of this reality, Stewart writes,

Paul would have said that a Christian is a man who strives, every day he lives, to make more and more real and actual and visible and convincing that which he is ideally and potentially by his union with Jesus Christ. . . . His relationship to Christ constrains him. It is a fact, but it is also a duty. It is a present reality, but also a beckoning idea. . . . ‘Are you in Christ?’ says Paul to the believer. ‘Then *be* a man in Christ indeed!’ (*A Man in Christ*, 199)

6. Union with Christ is experienced in the fellowship of the saints. Union with Christ is not only personal/individual. It is also *corporate* in nature.

- Romans 12:5; 1 Corinthians 12:13; Galatians 3:28; John 17:20-21

This is an especially important aspect to emphasize since many Christians today believe that their “union with Christ” permits them to fellowship with Christ apart from any connection to the local church. The highly subjective motto of “personal relationship with Jesus Christ” should be replaced with “corporate relationship with Jesus Christ.” As MacArthur & Mayhue state, “There is no union with Christ that does not issue in fellowship with his church” (*Biblical Doctrine*, 609).

7. Union with Christ is culminated in the realms of glory. This union is *indissoluble*. It can never fail. It will successfully bring us to future glory. This union, more than anything else, establishes the objective basis for the assurance of salvation.

- Colossians 1:27; 1 Corinthians 15:20-22 (the guarantee of future resurrection); Colossians 3:1-4 (the guarantee of future glorification); Romans 8:37-39

John Murray states,

We thus see that union with Christ has its source in the election of God the Father before the foundation of the world and it has its fruition in the glorification of the sons of God. . . . Its orbit has two foci, one the electing love of God the Father in the counsels of eternity, the other glorification with Christ in the manifestation of his glory. The former has no beginning, the latter has no end. . . . There is no truth, therefore, more suited to impart confidence and strength, comfort and joy in the Lord than this one of union with Christ.” (*Redemption Accomplished & Applied*, 174, 181)

D. Practical Implications

Homework (see below).

For Further Reflection

Scripture Memory: Galatians 2:20; 2 Corinthians 5:17

Recommended Reading:

- John MacArthur and Richard Mayhue, *Biblical Doctrine*, 602-609.
- John Murray, *Redemption Accomplished and Applied*, “Union with Christ,” 171-184.
- Anthony Hoekema, *Saved by Grace*, “Union with Christ,” 54-67.

Homework:

- When was the last time you reflected upon the truth that you are “in Christ”? How does this lesson impact your understanding of that important phrase?
- Review the “Essential Characteristics” listed above. Read through the Scriptures provided. For each of the seven characteristics, provide at least one “practical implication.”
- Study Philippians 3:8-11 carefully over the coming days. Make observations about Paul’s teaching on union with Christ from this text.
- Study Colossians 3:1-4 carefully over the coming days. Make observations about Paul’s teaching on union with Christ from this text.
- How does “union with Christ” impact your view of the church? More specifically, how does it impact the way you treat particular members of Grace Community Church (or your own local church)?
- How does “union with Christ” impact the way you associate with the world?

Hymns: “In Christ Alone” (*Hymns of Grace* #177); “His Forever” (*Hymns of Grace* #156)

This Week’s Audio: gracechurch.org/motw

Next Meeting: February 26 – Q & A with Costi Hinn