



Union with Christ: The Sum of Our Salvation

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The Apostles' Creed affirms, among other things, that Jesus Christ was "crucified under Pontius Pilate." The mention of a first-century Roman governor may seem out of place in this grand statement of Christian truth, but it anchors the gospel at a particular place in human history. But that raises another question: How could something so far away in space and time affect you and me? How could Jesus' death cover my sins and his resurrection guarantee my eternal destiny?



Bill Kynes

Theologically, we speak of the various ways in which Christ's saving work is applied to our lives: God calls us to himself; he regenerates us, giving us new spiritual life; he justifies us, taking away our sin and imputing to us the righteousness of Christ; he adopts us into his family; he sanctifies us, conforming us to the image of Christ; and he promises to complete his saving work by glorifying us with the resurrected glory of Christ. But these spiritual blessings flow into our lives only because we are somehow united to Christ. If our lives are not joined to his in some way, he remains a distant figure from ancient history—about as relevant to us as Julius Caesar.

Being "In Christ"

Our union with Christ is captured in that simple prepositional phrase, "in Christ," used by Paul in one form or another 164 times. Only as we are "in Christ" are we chosen, called, regenerated, justified, sanctified, redeemed, assured of the

resurrection, and given every spiritual blessing (Eph. 1:4,7; Rom. 6:5; 8:1; 2 Cor. 5:17; Eph. 1:3). This union with Christ spans space and time—so that Paul can say that the Christian has died with Christ (Rm. 6:1-11; Gal. 2:20); the Christian has been resurrected with Christ (Eph. 2:5f; Col. 3:1f.), the Christian has ascended with Christ to share now in his reign in the heavenly places (Rm. 5:17; Eph. 2:6) and the Christian is destined to share Christ's coming glory with him (Phil 3:20f; 1 Jn. 3:2).

No wonder some call our union with Christ one of the central messages of the New Testament. Theologian John Murray called it "the central truth of the whole doctrine of salvation."¹ A.W. Pink said, "The subject of spiritual union is the most important, the most profound, and yet the most blessed of any that is set forth in sacred Scripture."² Cambridge scholar B.F. Westcott wrote: "If once we realize what these words 'we are in Christ' mean, we shall know that beneath the surface of life lie depths which we cannot fathom, full alike of mystery and hope."³

Union with Christ is that spiritual reality whereby we as believers are joined to our Lord such that what is true of him becomes true of us. This spiritual union is the means by which space and time are transcended and we share in all the benefits of Jesus' work in history on our behalf. It is central to our understanding of who we are as Christians.

The Window of Social Solidarity

Surely, this notion of our being "in Christ" is mysterious. How do we live "in him"? And how does

he live “in me”? The Apostle Paul speaks of this relationship between Christ and his people as a “profound mystery” (Eph. 5:32). Among theologians it is sometimes referred to as a “mystical union” for that reason.

At least part of our difficulty in understanding this union relates to our false understanding of human life. Particularly as Americans, we think of people as autonomous individuals, independent agents. However, in much of life we do not live as isolated individuals but as a part of various social units that knit our lives together in all sorts of ways.

As a trivial example, one thinks of the identification between football fans and their team. The fate of the players on the field determines the outcome for the fans in the stands, who then proclaim, “We won!” At a more serious level, we are all involved in the social solidarity of our nation. In some ways, the entire nation is represented and embodied in one person—the President. As the head of state, he speaks for the country. If the President commits our country to some military action, then America is at war, and we all are affected.

At a personal level we experience solidarity in the context of our families. When a man and woman get married, they acquire each other’s assets, and they assume each other’s debts. And if I as a father squander my material resources and go bankrupt, my whole family suffers, even if they had nothing to do with it.

All of these are examples in our ordinary experience of ways in which we are bound together such that the well-being and destiny of many can be determined by one. And all are pointers to the most important social solidarity of all—the union of Christian believers with Jesus Christ.

Biblical Images of Union With Christ

The Bible provides a variety of images that help us gain some insight into this profound mystery. Jesus used a horticultural metaphor: “I am the vine, and you are the branches. If a man remains in me and I in him, he will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing” (Jn. 15:5). From this vital union with Christ we draw our nourishment, our strength, our spiritual life. Certainly our experience of the Lord’s Supper is to be a visible expression of this union (or “communion”) with Christ.

Another way that we can understand our relationship with Christ comes through the Hebrew conception of the solidarity between a king and his subjects. When David was anointed as king, we read that all the tribes of Israel came to him to pledge their loyalty, and they said, “We are your own flesh and blood” (2 Sam. 5:1). He became their leader, their representative before God. When King David sinned, as he did when he made a census of the people (2 Sam. 24:1-15), the whole nation suffered. But when he was victorious in battle, the whole nation prospered.

This notion of royal representation was then transferred to the solidarity of the Messiah with his people. When we turn to Jesus, the Messiah, in faith, and submit ourselves to him as our King, we are joined to him—he represents us, and we become his own “flesh and blood.”

The Apostle Paul presents several images for this union. He speaks of our relationship to Christ like that of our body’s relationship to its head. “He is the head of the body, the church” (Col. 1:18; cf. 1 Cor. 12:12,27; Eph. 4:16). What was the origin of this conception? One need look no further than Paul’s experience on the Damascus road. As a zealous Pharisee, Paul was intending to arrest leaders of this heretical sect when suddenly in a brilliant flash of light, he encountered the glorious risen Jesus, who asked, “Why are you persecuting me?” (Acts 9:4). In that instant Paul was confronted with the truth that to persecute the church was to persecute Jesus. Christians are in some mysterious way one with Christ, united as a body is united with its head.

Paul not only uses a biological image to picture our union with Christ, he also uses the image of a building—more specifically, a holy temple. Speaking to the Ephesian Christians, he writes, through Christ you “become members of God’s household, built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the chief cornerstone. In him the whole building is joined together and rises to become a holy temple in the Lord. And in him you too are being built together to become a dwelling in which God lives by his Spirit” (Eph. 2:18-22; cf. also 1 Pet. 2:4,5). We are united with Christ like stones in a building built on a cornerstone. In him we become a holy temple to God—a place where God dwells.

From bodies and buildings, Paul moves to the much more intimate and personal metaphor of marriage to picture our relationship with Christ. This is especially helpful, for marriage had been used already in the Old Testament to describe the covenant relationship between the Lord and his people Israel. More than that, the biblical description of marriage stresses the new union that is created by the marriage bond: “the two will become one flesh” (Gen. 2:24). The physical union of husband and wife becomes an expression of an inward union of love, and the new social unit that marriage creates pictures well our union with Christ (Eph. 5:32).

In a marriage the couple assumes a new identity, no longer as individuals but as a couple. Their happiness and their sorrows are joined to one another inextricably. Marriage also has legal aspects, and so it is in our relationship with Christ. When we are joined to him, he assumes the debt of our sin, taking it upon himself and bearing it away, and we share his righteousness. God sees us not as isolated individuals, but through the lens of our marriage relationship with Christ. In union with Christ we are presented as a beautiful bride in the sight of God.

Paul speaks of a body (with Christ as its head), a building (with Christ as its foundation), a marriage (with Christ as the groom), and in Rom. 5 and 1 Cor. 15 Paul develops one other picture of solidarity that sheds light on our relationship with Christ, cosmic in its scope and embracing all humanity—the picture of our union with Adam. “For just as through the disobedience of the one man (Adam), the many were made sinners, so also through the obedience of the one man (Jesus Christ), the many will be made righteous” (Rom. 5:19).

By nature all humanity has been united with Adam, such that his sin has impacted us all. We are all now subject to the curse of death that was placed upon him. Every one of us now shares something of his self-centered, sinful nature. But Jesus Christ has come to undo what Adam has done. By his obedience, Christ creates a new humanity, a people redeemed by his death, who now follow him in their lives. And whereas we are joined to Adam by nature, through our physical birth, we must be joined to Christ by faith, through a second, spiritual birth. Humanity in

Adam and the new humanity in Christ—this is the contrast, and the choice, Paul sets before us.

The mystical union with Jesus Christ can be pictured in rather ordinary images—a vine and its branches, a king and his subject, a building, a body, and a marriage. Our relationship with Adam opens up a new dimension which embraces all humanity. But one final image takes us to the very nature of God himself. Jesus tells us that our relationship with himself is in some sense a reflection of his own relationship with his Father in heaven. We are united to Christ in a way that reflects the mysterious union of the divine persons of the Trinity—the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.

In his great prayer in John 17, Jesus addressed the Father on behalf of his disciples. He prayed “that all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you. May they also be in us so that the world may believe that you have sent me. I have given them the glory that you gave me, that they may be one as we are one: I in them and you in me” (John 17:21-23). This is indeed a profound mystery!

Union with Christ as a Work of the Spirit

It must be emphasized that our union with Christ doesn’t mean that we somehow become God—that we are joined to the divine being in some metaphysical sense. It is a spiritual union that is the work of the Holy Spirit—“we were all baptized by [or in] one Spirit into one body” (1 Cor. 12:13). The Holy Spirit bridges the chasm of space and time. He takes what happened then—the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus—and brings its saving power into our lives now, by uniting us in a spiritual way with Christ. By the Spirit, Christ lives in us, and we in him. By the Spirit, we are now joined to Christ as a vine and its branches, as a king and his subjects, as a body and its head, as a building and its foundation, as a husband with his bride, and as the new humanity in Christ Jesus. The Spirit himself unites us with Christ and so applies all his saving work to our lives. “We know that we live in him and he in us, because he has given us of his Spirit” (1 John 4:13).⁴

Union with Christ—you could say it is the sum of our salvation. The saving work of Christ is captured in this one simple phrase—by faith we

are now in Christ. That's our only hope, for to be separate from Christ is to be "without hope and without God in the world" (Eph. 2:12). But to be in Christ is to share in all his riches. "Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in the heavenly realms with every spiritual blessing in Christ."

In the next issue of Knowing & Doing, we will see that the union with Christ we enjoy by faith is a relationship in which we are to abide.

Endnotes

1. *Redemption: Accomplished and Applied* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1955), p. 161.
2. Cited in Philip Ryken, "Justification and Union with Christ", <http://www.thegospelcoalition.org/articles.php?a=75>.
3. St. Paul's Epistle to the Ephesians (New York, 1906; repr. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1952) p. 186; cited in Lewis B. Smedes,

Union with Christ: A Biblical View of the New Life in Jesus Christ (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1970), pp. 58,59.

4. (cf. 1 Cor. 6:17,19; Rom. 8:9-11; 1 Jn. 3:24)

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