



Abiding in Christ Experiencing Our Union with the Savior

by Bill Kynes

Senior Fellow, C.S. Lewis Institute

Pastor, Cornerstone Evangelical Free Church, Annandale, Virginia

No more profound and theologically rich description of what it means to be a Christian can be found than this: by faith we have been united with Jesus Christ. This spiritual union is the means by which space and time are transcended and we share in all the benefits of Jesus' work on our behalf. The nineteenth-century British theologian H.R. Mackintosh, in his famous work on the person of Christ, says this: "It is not putting it too strongly to say that union with Christ is a brief name for all that the apostles mean by salvation."¹ Through our union with Christ, what is true of him becomes true of us. By the work of the Spirit, Christ lives in us and we in him, and we partake of all his riches.



Bill Kynes

A Christian is "a new creature in Christ" (cf. 2 Cor. 5:17), yet for most believers this new status too often remains an unclaimed treasure. They know they are united with Christ, but that union has no effect on their lives. As with a long-distance, arranged marriage, their faith in Christ has resulted in a new legal condition and a new name, but it has not resulted in a real relationship of love. What's gone wrong? Our union with Christ must be experienced—we must *abide* in Christ.

Jesus expressed the need for engagement in this union in John 15. The fact of our union with him is clear: "I am the vine, you are the branches" (v. 5). But this union requires a continuing action: "Abide in me as I abide in you" (v. 4). Our objective

state calls for a subjective experience. We move from the indicative (what is true of us) to the imperative (what we must do), with the former providing the essential basis for the latter.

Living out our new status in Christ is a fundamental feature of New Testament teaching. Paul, in his letter to the Romans, describes how we have been baptized into Christ, having been joined with him in his death and resurrection. The Apostle then moves to the application: "Therefore, do not let sin exercise dominion in your mortal bodies, to make you obey their passions. No longer present your members to sin as instruments of wickedness, but present yourselves to God as those who have been brought from death to life, and present your members to God as instruments of righteousness" (Rm. 6:12-13).

That same pattern appears in Paul's letter to the Colossians. "Since, then, you have been raised with Christ, set your hearts on things above, where Christ is seated at the right hand of God. Set your minds on things above, not on earthly things. For you died, and your life is now hidden with Christ in God" (Col. 3:1-3).

The Puritans emphasized this distinction between our status and our experience by speaking of union and communion. We are united to Christ by faith through the gracious work of God's Spirit. Now we must seek to live out that union in a relationship of communion with God.² Our union precedes our communion and provides the sure and certain basis for it, grounded entirely in the saving work of God. Our experience of communion can fluctuate with the inconsistencies of our efforts to engage in those activities which foster

that relationship. But God's love cannot fluctuate, for we have a union with Christ that nothing can separate.

The Divine Model of the Father and the Son in John's Gospel

What does this abiding relationship look like? John's Gospel uses the phrase "to abide in" (Greek: *minein en*) with a personal object to express the relationship of Jesus to the Father and of both to believers. The clear priority, however, must be given to Jesus' mutual indwelling with the Father: "Don't you believe that I am in the Father and the Father is in me? The words that I speak to you are not from myself, but the Father who abides in me does his work" (14:10). This is a dynamic relationship which energizes the ministry of Jesus and is inexplicable without it. Out of this personal union come his words and his works, which manifest the character of God. "Do not believe me unless I do what my Father does. But if I do it, even though you do not believe me, believe the miracles, that you may learn and understand that the Father is in me, and I in the Father" (10:37, 38).

The Son obeys the Father and imitates the Father (5:19, 20; 14:31), but the Father imparts his life to the Son ("I live because of the Father" [6:57; also 5:26]), and together they share this common life and are united in love (3:35; 5:20; 14:31; 15:10; 17:21-23). This relationship between the Father and the Son becomes the model and source of the relationship between Jesus and his disciples.

Jesus called men and women into this relationship of mutual indwelling using the most graphic imagery: "He who eats my flesh and drinks my blood abides in me and I in him" (Jn. 6:56). Just as the Father has loved Jesus, so Jesus has loved his disciples, and they are to abide in his love (15:9). Just as Jesus has remained in his Father's love by obeying his commands, so the disciples are to abide in Jesus' love by obeying his commands (15:10). And as they abide in him, Jesus will convey his life to them, even as a vine gives life to its branches (15:4-6). His life will manifest itself in their lives as they bear fruit, even as his works were the work of his Father. Apart from him his disciples can do nothing (15:5), just as Jesus could do nothing apart from the Father (5:19,30).

Jesus mediates to his disciples the relationship he enjoys with his heavenly Father. "Just as

the living Father sent me and I live because of the Father, so the one who feeds on me will live because of me" (6:57). The one who loves Jesus will be loved by the Father, and together the Father and the Son will make their abode (Greek *mone*—a cognate of *menein*) with him (14:23). "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" (17:22, 23). This the perfect unity that results from the mutual indwelling of the Father, the Son, and Christian believers.

Abiding in Christ as a Shared Life

Central to this biblical presentation of our union with Christ is the notion of a shared life: "Just as the living Father sent me and I live because of the Father, so the one who feeds on me will live because of me" (Jn. 6:57). Paul puts it even more forcefully: "I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. The life I live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me" (Gal. 2:20).

With this we come to the most profound mystery of the relationship between the human and the divine. Certainly, this union with Christ must not be confused with ideas of the Hellenistic mystery cults, some of which taught a loss of individuality or a pantheistic absorption of the believer into the being of the divine. The teaching of the New Testament maintains throughout a moral dimension that assumes individual responsibility. It is a relationship that always begins with the divine initiative, but which calls for a human response: "Abide in me...abide in my word...abide in my love" (Jn. 15:4, 7, 9). Paul is not declaring the loss of his own personal identity here. Though he says "I no longer live," that statement is immediately qualified in the following sentence which affirms the "the life I live in the body." Christ does not live instead of Paul, but Christ lives in and through him.

The parallel with the union of Christ with the Father suggests that the human and divine relationship that Paul is pointing to may resemble in some respects the unfathomable mysteries of the Trinity (with its co-inherence of divine persons—sharing a common divinity yet distinct in personhood) and of the incarnation (with its hypostatic union—the distinct human and divine natures united in the one divine Person of the Son).³ This

ought to make us wary of trying to make clear determinations about what I do as opposed to what God does, even within my own heart, mind and will. In Phil. 2:12 Paul clearly calls us to act: “Work out your salvation with fear and trembling,” but he immediately recognizes the mysterious divine activity which must be presupposed: “for it is God who works in you to will and to act according to his good purpose.”

Abiding in Christ is the essence of the promise of the New Covenant—the God who commands us from the outside in the Old Covenant now comes to live within us in the New. Christianity is not a self-help religion, but a relationship with God through Jesus Christ that brings new life by the Spirit. In our union with Christ we are forgiven and in that union we are regenerated. We now participate in Christ—he is in us by the Spirit, and, in Martin Luther’s words, Christ himself is “the basis, the cause, the source of all our own actual righteousness.”⁴ As we entrust ourselves to Christ and depend upon him, we are like branches that draw on the vitality of the vine to produce good fruit.

How Do We Abide?

How do we abide in this new life that is ours in Christ? How do we move from the theological to the practical?

The first practical step is to realize that we can never neglect the theological. In other words, we must constantly call to mind the truth of who we are in Christ—that we are chosen in him, holy and dearly loved children of God (cf. Col. 3:12). This is the gospel, and we must preach the gospel to ourselves every day. To abide in Christ is to recognize this gospel truth as reality and to live in the light of it. “See that what you have heard from the beginning remains in you. If it does, you also will remain in the Son and in the Father” (1 John 2:24).

To help us, God has given us various “means of grace,” which are simply disciplines that help us to live in this truth. First, nothing can replace the regular reading of God’s Word. We express our dependence on Christ’s power by going to his Word—by reading it, studying it, meditating on it, memorizing it—drawing upon its comfort, its truth, and its guidance. Through that Word our minds are transformed and renewed (Rm. 12:1). If Christ is to dwell in us, so must his Word (Jn. 15:7; Col. 3:16).

In response to that Word we must also go to God in prayer. Wasn’t this the constant practice of Jesus himself? He recognized his own dependence on the Father (“I do nothing on my own but speak just what the Father has taught me.” [John 8:28]), and his life of prayer was a visible expression of that dependence.

Also given to us to help us abide in Christ are the sacraments or ordinances. Here the truth of our union with Christ becomes visible and tangible in our going down and rising in the water (in the practice of immersion) by which we are “baptized into Christ” (Rm. 6:3) and in our eating of the bread and the drinking of the cup in the communion meal by which we feed on Christ in our hearts by faith. These physical acts reinforce the spiritual reality of our union with Christ and through them our faith is confirmed and nourished.

These sacramental practices point us to the importance of our fellowship with other believers as a means by which we experience our union with Christ. Inasmuch as the church is the body of Christ, indwelt by his Spirit, our interaction with one another becomes a means of engaging with Christ himself. Through the ministry of others in the body, I receive Christ’s instruction, his encouragement, his rebuke, and his comfort.

We need that encouragement and comfort, for our gracious God sometimes uses more severe means of grace in our lives: “every branch that does bear fruit he prunes so that it will be even more fruitful” (Jn. 15:2). Suffering can be a fruitful experience, as we allow our lives to be shaped by it, and as we share in the suffering of Christ himself (cf. Phil. 3:10).

Because our union with Christ means a shared life with one who is holy, the experience of that life is incompatible with sin. Therefore, we cannot expect to grow in Christ apart from obedience to his commands: “Those who obey his commands live in him, and he in them” (1 John 3:24).

Obedience, in fact, becomes the key to love—“As the Father has loved me,” Jesus said, “so have I loved you. Now remain in my love. If you obey my commands, you will remain in my love, just as I have obeyed my Father’s commands and remain in his love” (John 15:9,10). To share in the life of God is to share in his love, for “God is love. Whoever abides in love abides in God, and God abides in him” (1 Jn. 4:16, author’s translation).

Abiding in Christ: A Gracious Work of the Spirit

Our union with Christ is indeed “a profound mystery” (Eph. 5:32). By the work of the Spirit we are united with our Savior, and it is equally by the work of the Spirit that we experience communion with him: “We know that we abide in him and he in us, because he has given us of his Spirit” (1 John 4:13). Like a sailor raising his sails, we must do all we can to catch the wind, but it is the wind that moves the ship. So in our efforts to abide in Christ, it is always God’s Spirit who must blow as a gentle breeze, enabling us to experience the divine life that is ours in Christ.

Notes

1. H. R. Mackintosh, *The Doctrine of the Person of Jesus Christ* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1913), p. 334.

2. Cf. John Owen’s 17th century work recently re-published: *Communion with the Triune God*, edited by Kelly M. Kopic and Justin Taylor (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2007).

3. John Owen attributes to Cyprian words that reflect the parallel we have just suggested: “certainly our union and his neither mixes our persons, nor unites our substances but joins our affections and binds our wills together.” (*Communion with the Triune God*, p. 94, n. 29).

4. *Luther’s Works*, ed. Harold J. Grimm, vol. 31 (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1957), p. 298; cited in Miroslav Volf, *Free of Charge: Giving and Forgiving in a Culture Stripped of Grace* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2005), p. 200.

Bill Kynes studied philosophy at the University of Florida, where he also played quarterback and was inducted into the university’s Athletic Hall of Fame. He attended Oxford University as a Rhodes Scholar, receiving an M.A. in theology. He has an M.Div. from Trinity Evangelical Divinity School in Deerfield, Illinois, and a Ph.D. in New Testament from Cambridge University. Bill has served as senior pastor of Cornerstone Evangelical Free Church in Annandale, Virginia, since 1986. His publications include A Christology of Solidarity: Jesus as the Representative of His People in Matthew and several articles and reviews in Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels, Journal of Theological Studies, Trinity Journal, and The Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society. He is the editor of The Ministerial Forum, a publication of the Evangelical Free Church of America Ministerial Association, and has served on a number of boards of the EFCA and other Christian organizations. He and his wife Susan have four boys: Will, Matthew, Cameron, and Cason.

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8001 Braddock Road, Suite 300 • Springfield, VA 22151
703/914-5602
www.cslewisinstitute.org

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