



**Study guide for  
UNION WITH CHRIST**

## Preface

I hope this look into the biblical and theological roots of union with Christ is helpful for you. The guide is broken into three sections.

Section One gives a Historical perspective. It gives a sweeping overview of how the concept of “Union with Christ” has been used by various groups and movements in the church. This broad survey will help the reader grasp the history of this idea in the church.

Section Two focusing on exegetical and biblical theology relating to Union with Christ. It will be a deep dive into Scripture. One note on this take John and Paul explore the concept of union with Christ, each using different language to point to the one reality. We will focus on Paul’s usage given how much he uses the expression.

Section Three looks at “Union with Christ” from the perspective of systematic theology. Much ink has been spilt on the subject. While selected entries have been added for the reader’s exploration. In light of the amount of material available much of it has been condensed and book references given in case readers wish to pursue the topic further.

In all sections excerpts has a short note to inform and orient the reader as to context and background of the author. Occasionally short reading directions and tips on approaching the content have been given to aid readers in engaging the content.

# Section ONE

## Historical Look at union in Christ

From Article A. J. Spence "Union with Christ," in New Dictionary of Theology

### UNION WITH CHRIST

An ongoing task facing Christian reflection is to conceive how the life, death and resurrection of Jesus can be of benefit to those who believe. How are his spiritual achievements, his dramatic history and his unique status able to transform the lives and standing before God of those who are temporally, geographically and culturally far removed from him? The church's various attempts to respond to these questions are brought together under the doctrine of 'union with Christ'.

#### Incarnational union

A widespread view among the Fathers of the early church that continues to be upheld in the \*Eastern Orthodox tradition is that the \*incarnation, the act of the eternal Son of God whereby he took human nature to himself, is not merely the foundation of our salvation, but is a constituent element of it. The incarnation is viewed as salvific in and of itself. The idea is that in \*Christ God became one with us in order to make us one with him; he stooped to take our nature, in order that we might be restored and so become partakers of his divine nature. The nature which he assumed to himself he healed from its tendency towards sin and decay. This understanding of the divine Word's union with human nature as that which, at least in part, effects our \*salvation is dependent on the notion that 'human nature' has some form of corporate reality apart from its particularization in individual humans. It is held that when the Son of God became incarnate, human nature was itself transformed, and all humans as participants in that nature potentially share in the renewal of their being. Some, however, find it difficult to conceive how the incarnate Christ can be both a particular human being and also the realization of human nature in general. Others have a concern that this theory interprets Jesus' birth, rather than his life, death and resurrection, as central to his saving ministry and so appears to run counter to the emphasis of the NT authors on the salvific centrality of the Easter events. An incarnational union is sometimes spoken of as a 'physical' theory of the \*atonement in that it gives priority to matters of substance and being rather than those of obedience and faith in its understanding of human salvation.

#### United by faith

The Protestant emphasis on \*faith as that which unites us to Christ owes much to the German Reformer Martin \*Luther. Luther argued that humans have no ability of themselves to do anything of value to achieve salvation. In fact they no longer have the freedom to do anything at all that is truly good. Consequently, their salvation must come completely from Christ and not from any human endeavour. The individual's recognition of their inability and of Christ's sufficiency is the impetus for the exercise of faith. On the one hand, the human soul is full of \*sin, death and damnation. On the other, Jesus Christ is full of \*grace, life and salvation. Faith is that which unites the soul with Christ as a bride is united with her bridegroom. Luther argued: 'Let faith come between the soul and Christ and sins, death and damnation will be Christ's, while grace, life and salvation will be the soul's; for if Christ is a bridegroom, he must take upon himself the things which are his bride's and bestow upon her the things that are his' (Selections from His Writings, p. 60). This theory of a 'double imputation' was formative in the development of the Lutheran, and so Protestant, view of \*justification. The difficulty with it, for some, is that it suggests that human faith is the bond that binds the believer to Christ, and so, contrary to Luther's original intention, the believer's union with Christ is held to depend on an unreliable human faculty.

### Covenantal union

The \*Reformed tradition sought to explain the church's union with Christ from the perspective of \*covenant, that is, the divine institution of mutual obligations between God and humankind. The covenant provides the framework for the exercise of human faith, \*love and obedience within the secure divine commitment to forgive, transform and safeguard his people. Consequently, a covenantal union understands Christians to be united with God through Christ in a relationship grounded on the divine promises that have their foundation in Christ's mediatory work. Within the general covenant character of God's dealings with humankind, one aspect of Paul's teaching, sometimes called federal union, has been especially noted and developed within later Reformed tradition. The way in which men and women are dealt with by God 'in Christ' is seen to parallel his dealings with humankind 'in \*Adam'. God deals with 'the many' through a representative person, or 'federal head', in the one case imputing Adam's sin to his descendants, in the other, Christ's \*obedience and \*atonement to his followers, with all that flows from that. Being united to Christ is understood then as participation in this covenantal union with him as our 'federal head'. The covenant has its ultimate foundation in the eternal decision of God to be gracious rather than in the temporal response of the believer to the gospel. This means that the concept of grace or election (see \*Predestination) has priority over the human act of faith, which is itself viewed as a gift of grace. Some are concerned that this suggests an arbitrariness in God's dealings with humankind.

### Sacramental union

The \*Catholic tradition, in particular, has laid stress on the \*sacraments as the means of initiating and continuing union with Christ. Christian incorporation into Christ, by which one becomes a member of his body, is through \*baptism as the outward sacramental rite of initiation coupled with repentance and faith in Jesus Christ as the inner means of appropriation. Baptism in Christ's name unites the baptized with Jesus Christ, especially with his death, burial and resurrection. Similarly, the \*Eucharist or Holy Communion, as the covenant rite or sacrament of continuance in Christ and his body, enables Christians to nurture, deepen and strengthen their relationship or union with Christ and with one another, as they truly partake of Jesus through the elements of wine and bread. Communion focuses on Christ's death as the self-sacrificing event of divine reconciliation and the source of a Christian's new life in him. Sacramental union is closely related structurally to a union of faith. Historically, however, the nature of the relation between the agency of the sacraments and that of saving faith in uniting us to Christ has been vigorously contested, and the interpretation of both baptism and Holy Communion has been the cause of much hostility and division among the various branches of the church.

### Experiential union

The Son of God became human, shared in our condition and lived a life that is the paradigm or primary example for all Christians. However, nearly all the traditions have emphasized that it is the privilege of believers not merely to follow him but to actually participate in Jesus' life, death and \*resurrection. Union with Christ is understood to mean that we share through baptism in his death so that the dominance of sin should no longer be determinative of our own individual experience. It also means that the believer participates in Christ's resurrection, not simply at the end of the age, but during this present life through the empowerment of the \*Spirit. Christians share Jesus' status, relationship and privileges as sons and daughters of God and are called to suffer with him, to pass through physical death to ultimate physical resurrection and so reign with him in glory. His eternal inheritance as man is also theirs. En route to that goal all Christians are called into progressive conformity to his \*image, continually renewing and transforming their characters into God's likeness by the power of his Holy Spirit and by the application of God's revealed will to every aspect of their lives. In short, it is through union with Christ that Christians are \*sanctified or made to be holy (see \*Christian life).

### Spiritual or mystical union

The final perspective on union with Christ, stressed particularly by the \*mystical, \*pietist and \*charismatic traditions, is that the Christian is united to Christ in his or her conscious experience. This is sometimes called 'mystical union', and is rooted in the mystery of the encounter of the spirit of man and the Spirit of God or of Christ, often using the analogy of a bride and her groom. It originates in a new birth brought about within a person by the Holy Spirit, and centres on the hidden life of \*prayer, meditation, contemplation and \*worship. The object of these spiritual disciplines is to deepen one's knowledge of the Lord and one's love-relationship with him. It requires the submission of the whole of one's life to him in trust and obedience, knowing that such a submission of love in response to love is the route to our greatest possible fulfillment. It is believed that those fully renewed in God's image will enjoy unfettered and unclouded fellowship with him, freed from every delusion of independence which would block the free flow of pure love, truth, trust, cooperative obedience and delight between themselves, their Creator and the other creatures. Some are concerned that such an emphasis on personal devotion can be idealistic and inward-looking and tends to undermine the calling for Christians in humility and brokenness to serve God in the world.

Informed by the perspectives of these various traditions we could say that our union with Christ has its foundations in the loving purpose of a covenanting God; is established by the saving ministry of his incarnate Son; is entered into through the outward (sacramental) response of an inner trusting faith in the promises of the gospel; sanctifies us by transforming us into the likeness of Jesus as the Spirit baptizes us into his life and privileges; and introduces us to an intimate loving relationship with Christ, and through him to the Father, which we shall experience through time and eternity.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> A. J. Spence "UNION WITH CHRIST," in *New Dictionary of Theology: Historical and Systematic*. 2nd edit. Ed: Martin Davie, Tim Grass, Stephen R. Holmes, John McDowell, T. A. Noble, (Downers Grove, InterVarsity Press, 2016) 929-932

## Section Two

### Biblical & Exegetical look at Paul's language of Union in Christ

#### Introduction

"Once you have your eyes opened to this concept of union with Christ, you will find it almost everywhere in the New Testament"<sup>2</sup> - Anthony Hoekema

Did you know? Luther loved pronouns. For Luther the *pronoun* lay at the heart of the Gospel. "The Son of God gave himself for *me*." Maybe it was the preacher in him, or maybe it was a reaction to the scholastics before him, who loved a good *proposition*, like "God is immoveable." In any case, Christian thinkers have had a fascination with parts of speech. This guide is devoted to one part of speech – the *prepositions*: "in, into, with, and through Christ." Such a study may seem trivial to some but such an exploration is no trifle. Even Basil the Great did a 'theology of prepositions' in his defense of the doctrine of the Holy Spirit. Speaking of the importance of prepositions, HE wrote: "*What you want us to examine is both little and great, little in the brevity of its utterance ... and great in the power of its meaning.*"<sup>3</sup> The brevity of Paul's preferred prepositions are obvious. The mystery is how powerfully such a small statement when understood can change one's reading of Paul.

#### 1. The Grammar and semantics of 'In Christ'

Paul uses the phrase "in Christ" (ἐν Χριστῷ) seventy-three times. When we add other ways of expressing union with or participation in Christ (e.g., "in him," "with Christ," "through Christ") the number of Pauline instances more than doubles, to 164 instances. The statistics clearly point to some significant findings. First "The variety of ways in which the phrases appear in Paul's letters indicates that they serve as a flexible idiom"<sup>4</sup>

Unless you're an English teacher, idiom may be a new term for you. In Grammar (English and Greek) an idiom is a phrase used as an expression that cannot be understood from the meanings of its separate words but must be learned as a whole. For example the expression "give up," meaning "surrender," if you looked at give and up you would not conclude "surrender". Context is needed to determine meaning. Such expressions are typically restricted to a particular context or group of people and often function as a type of language peculiar to a people or distinct community. So theological idioms are often formed from a person or community seeking to somehow articulate a profound theological reality in simple terms. They function as a theological shorthand.

#### 2. The Usage of Paul's Expression

The context in which Paul uses the phrases "In Christ, In him, through Christ" is helpful for understanding the meaning of those expressions. After surveying all the times Paul used the

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<sup>2</sup> Anthony Hoekema, *Saved by Grace* (Grand Rapids, Eerdmans, 1989), 64.

<sup>3</sup> Basil the Great, *On the Holy Spirit*, 1,2.

<sup>4</sup> Mark A. Seifrid, "In Christ." *Dictionary of Paul and His Letters*, ed. Gerald F. Hawthorne, Ralph P. Martin, and Daniel G. Reid, (Downers Grove: IVP, 1993) 908

expression to convey the ideas of locality, and instrumentality.<sup>5</sup> He uses the expression a few more ways but the ones explained below seem to have great theological significance to Paul.

1.) locality means, where something is or is being done, e.g., "X is in Christ".... the phrase takes a local sense where "certain ones/churches (are) in Christ," Locality conveys the spatial sense to be used metaphorically.

2.) instrumentality means, what is being done, e.g., "A does x through Christ"  
At another corner one finds statements like "God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ" (2 Cor 5:19). Here Christ is viewed as the instrument of God's action (debate on the meaning of this verse notwithstanding).

The instrumental meaning of ἐν Χριστῷ, (in Christ) at least, is clear. God forgives us "in Christ" by making Christ and his cross the instrument of the action by which God deals with sin.<sup>6</sup>

In Colossians and Ephesians the frequency of "in Christ" "in Him" increases sharply. The Instrumental and spatial take center stage.

In Ephesians about one-half of the occurrences of "in Christ," are instrumental. In most cases, "God is the subject of the decision or action made 'in Christ.'"<sup>7</sup> It may be due to Paul's aim in the letter. More generally, the phrases always seem to concern the relationship formed in - by - through Jesus Christ between God and God's people.<sup>8</sup> Chapter one is a great example of this.

As for the spatial aspect

Paul uses a series of new spatial metaphors.

1. The fullness of deity dwells in Christ bodily (Col 2:9).
2. The divine purpose for creation, redemption and the consummation of all things is comprehended within the "sphere" of Christ (Eph 1:3-10).
3. Believers have been placed in heaven by being placed in him (Eph 2:6; Col 3:1).
4. They have been made part of a body of which Christ is the head\* (Eph 4:15-16).
5. They are being built together as a temple\* (Eph 2:21-22).
6. They have put on a new humanity (Eph 4:22-24; Col 3:10).

Summary: "All these images present Christ as the focal expression of deity and the divine purpose, and consequently the basis of the life and unity of the entire church."<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Kevin J. Vanhoozer "From "Blessed in Christ" to "Being in Christ" in, In Christ" in Paul: Explorations in Paul's Theology of Union and Participation ed. Michael J. Thate, Kevin J. Vanhoozer, Constantine R. Campbell, (Tübingen, Germany. Mohr Siebeck, 2014) 14

<sup>6</sup> Mark A. Seifrid. "In Christ." Dictionary of Paul and His Letters, ed. Gerald F. Hawthorne, Ralph P. Martin, and Daniel G. Reid, (Downers Grove: IVP, 1993) 908

<sup>7</sup> Markus Barth, Ephesians: Introduction, Translation, and Commentary on Chapters 1-3 (AB 34A; Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1974), 69.

<sup>8</sup> Kevin J. Vanhoozer "From "Blessed in Christ" to "Being in Christ" in, In Christ" in Paul. 14

<sup>9</sup> Mark A. Seifrid. "In Christ." Dictionary of Paul and His Letters, ed. Gerald F. Hawthorne, Ralph P. Martin, and Daniel G. Reid, (Downers Grove: IVP, 1993) 908

### 3. Background and Synthesis

Propositions have an expiration date. They can only take us so far. Some scholars have argued that at this point we should build on the grammatical notions by relating Paul's thought to the Old Testament understanding of his day. Central would be the question, when Paul wrote, "Christ" what did he think about? Did his Jewish training take control filling in the necessary categories or Did the divine uniqueness of Christ and Paul's commitment to the Easter event shape his understanding of the title 'christ'? Scholars are split on the answer. From one of those two starting points scholars have explored Paul's conception of the title "Christ". (1.) Some scholars see Paul's holding a unique take on the messiah. They see Paul focusing on the distinctive aspects which transcended Jewish conceptions of the messiah. They held that his uniqueness as a divine, crucified and risen Messiah was the framework for Paul's understanding of the expression "in Christ". (2.) Other scholars take an opposite method to the one above. These scholars often assert the fact that Christ is his title of his office and not Jesus' last name. They hold that Paul's focus on the story of Israel and the Jewish understanding of the Messiah's office and vocation shaped his understanding of Christ and subsequently the meaning of "In Christ".

#### (1.) Method one: christ as divine title

##### CHRIST

The term *Christos* (*christ*), if studied in the context of its varied uses in the Pauline corpus, reveals how the apostle drew on, amplified, transformed and transcended some early Jewish ideas about the Messiah. For Paul the content of the term *Christos* was mainly derived from the Christ event and his experience of that event. This led to three elements in his preaching about Christ that were without known precedent in early Judaism: (1) Messiah is called God; (2) Messiah is said to have been crucified, and his death is seen as redemptive; (3) Messiah is expected to come to earth again. Non-Christian Jews did not speak of a crucified Messiah much less of a Second Coming of Messiah. Nor do we have any evidence that early Jews were willing to call the Messiah "God," or one in whom the fullness of deity dwells.

##### The En Christō Formula.

It was probably due to careful reflection on some of the three elements listed above that Paul came to use the phrase *en Christō* ("in Christ") as he did. *En Christō* was unquestionably one of Paul's favorite phrases, appearing 164 times in the chief Pauline letters and another half dozen in the form *en Christō Iēsou* ("in Christ Jesus") in the Pastorals. This total is especially remarkable in view of the fact that other NT writers hardly ever used the phrase (but cf., e.g., 1 Pet 3:16; 5:10, 14). Paul never used the term *Christianos* ("Christian"), rather *en Christō* seems to be his substitute for this adjective (cf. 1 Cor 3:1). At other points the phrase *en Christō* seems to have a more pregnant sense indicating the environment or atmosphere in which Christians live, that is, they are "in Christ." A. Deissmann in his pioneering study *Die Neutestamentliche Formel "in Christo Jesu"* (1892) argued that this formula had both a local and mystical meaning in which Christ, as a sort of universal Spirit, was the very atmosphere in which believers lived.

A good example of this usage is found in 2 Corinthians 5:17: "If anyone is in Christ, that person (or "there") is a new creation" (cf. Phil 3:8-9; see *Creation and New Creation*). In fact whole congregations could be said to be "in Christ" in the same way they were said to be "in God" (cf. Gal 1:22 and Phil 1:1 with 1 Thess 1:1). There are a variety of other passages which seem to have a locative sense (1 Thess 4:16; Gal 2:17; 1 Cor 1:2; 15:18). A. Schweitzer in *The Mysticism of Paul the Apostle* (1931), rejecting much of Deissmann's reasoning, argued that the solidarity that Paul envisioned Christians having with Christ and with each other is a corporate one of a quasi-physical nature which occurs through the material rite of water baptism\* and not through some subjective experience brought about through faith.\* This

surely goes beyond the evidence and contradicts such texts as Galatians 2:16 and Romans 5:2. Schweitzer's view seems to have been more indebted to his own understanding of early Jewish eschatology than to Paul.

Paul does speak of Christ being in the believer (Gal 2:20; Rom 8:10), but this is not nearly so characteristic of the apostle as the phrase *en Christō*. It does not seem possible either to argue that Paul is simply using the language of transfer from one dominion to another or to eliminate completely the locative sense of *en Christō* in various instances. Nor can these texts simply be explained as another way of saying one belongs to Christ or that things are accomplished for the believer through Christ. Rather, for Paul both logically and theologically the concept of being *en Christō* is central. One cannot do something for or with Christ unless one is first *en Christō*. One cannot approach the Father through the Son (see Son of God) unless one is *en Christō*. If one is *en Christō* then one is in his body—the *ekklēsia* (see Church). The effects of being in Christ are varied: human spiritual transformation by means of death to sin,\* possession of the Spirit (see Holy Spirit), being made a new creation or creature, having one's inner person and mind renewed, being given both hope\* and assurance of a bodily resurrection\* like unto Christ's, and being united spiritually with a great host of other believers in a living entity Paul likens to a body.

The christological implications of this use of *en Christō* have been ably summed up by C. F. D. Moule:

"if it is really true that Paul thought of himself and other Christians as 'included' or 'located' in Christ; . . . it indicates a more than individualistic conception of the person of Christ . . . a plurality of persons can find themselves 'in Christ', as limbs are in the body." (Moule, 62, 65)

This means that Paul conceives of the exalted Christ as a divine being in whom Christians everywhere can dwell. Put another way, Paul's views on both incorporation into Christ and its result, being in Christ, suggest a view of Christ as a divine being "in" whom all believers can dwell and at the same time a divine being who can be "in" all believers, through the presence of the Spirit.<sup>10</sup>

From Ben Witherington, III. Eatery on 'Christ' in Dictionary of Paul and His Letters

## **(2.) Method two: Christ as Messiah of Old**

Note: Below two secondary sources are given. Because of this footnotes from the articles were added so further primary source study would be possible should anyone desire.

1. Article from Mark A. Garcia, Imputation and the Christology of Union with Christ<sup>11</sup>

"As Wright explains, the tradition of Pauline interpretation that saw in *Χριστός* merely a proper name rather than a title is misguided. *Χριστός* is a title, and as such focuses on the incorporative, that is, "it refers to the Messiah as the one in whom the people of God are summed up, so that they can be referred to as being 'in' him, as coming or growing 'into' him,

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<sup>10</sup> Ben Witherington, III. "The *En Christō* Formula." In "Christ." Dictionary of Paul and His Letters, ed. Gerald F. Hawthorne, Ralph P. Martin, and Daniel G. Reid. (Downers Grove: IVP, 1993) 98–99

<sup>11</sup> Mark A. Garcia, Imputation and the Christology of Union with Christ. Westminster Theological journal 6S (2006): 223

and so forth."<sup>12</sup> Without entering here into a full discussion of Wright's model, incorporation, being "in Christ," is primarily ecclesiological language, signaling the truth that, precisely as Messiah, all that Christ is he is for those united to him. The Messiah, whose self-understanding Wright frames along "vocational" lines, "sums up his people in himself, so that what is true of him is true of them."<sup>13</sup>

## 2. Article from Kevin J. Vanhoozer "From "Blessed in Christ" to "Being in Christ"<sup>14</sup>

The instrumental meaning of ἐν Χριστῷ, at least, is clear. God forgives us "in Christ" by making Christ and his cross the instrument of the action by which God deals with sin. The force of the locative sense of "in Christ" is less obvious. Can we plot the coordinates of the space designated by "in Christ"? Where exactly is this? One suggestion is "in his body," though whether this refers to his exalted state, his earthly church, or a new humanity of which he is the head (or all of the above) is another open question. One potentially helpful way forward is to view the locative "in" not as spatial but spherical, that is, as pertaining to the sphere or domain of Christ's lordly influence, itself coextensive with being "in the Spirit."<sup>15</sup> In this way, the spiritual sense (so to speak) of ἐν corresponds to its original literal/locative sense. In the words of Murray Harris: "It is used to denote the sphere within which some action occurs or the element or reality in which something is contained or consists."<sup>16</sup>

Harris also allows for other uses/meanings of ἐν Χριστῷ, including "in-corporative union."<sup>17</sup> As with all difficult exegetical decisions, historical context looms large. Which context did Paul likely have in mind in speaking of what God is doing to believers in Christ? One intriguing possibility is that Paul used ἐν to signal a distinctly Hebrew conception of social solidarity

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<sup>12</sup> N. T. Wright, "Χριστός as 'Messiah' in Paul: Philemon 6," in *The Climax of the Covenant: Christ and the Law in Pauline Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1992), 41. Wright argues from the importance of Messiahship in Paul's letters.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 48; cf. Wright, "The Letter to the Galatians: Exegesis and Theology," in *Between Two Horizons: Spanning New Testament Studies and Systematic Theology* (ed. Joel B. Green and Max Turner; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), 216. Of course, for Wright justification is also primarily ecclesiological: "Justification, to offer a fuller statement, is the recognition and declaration by God that those who are thus called and believing are in fact his people, the single family promised to Abraham, that as the new covenant people their sins are forgiven, and that since they have already died and been raised with the Messiah they are assured of final bodily resurrection at the last" ("Letter to the Galatians," 235). This is set opposite the view that justification is the way someone becomes a Christian

<sup>14</sup> Kevin J. Vanhoozer "From "Blessed in Christ" to "Being in Christ" in, *In Christ" in Paul*. 14-16

<sup>15</sup> So Stanley E. Porter, who describes Paul's use of the phrase "in Christ" as "spherical," in the sense of one being "in the sphere of Christ's control." *Idioms of the Greek New Testament* (2d ed.; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1994), 159.

<sup>16</sup> Murray J. Harris, "Appendix: Prepositions and Theology in the Greek New Testament," in *New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology* (ed. Colin Brown; vol. 3; Carlisle: Paternoster, 1976), 1191. See also Harris, *Prepositions and Theology in the Greek New Testament: An Essential Reference Resource for Exegesis* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2012), 122–26.

<sup>17</sup> Harris, "Prepositions and Theology," 1192.

according to which the “many” were viewed as incorporated into a representative “one.”<sup>18</sup> This way of relating the one and the many is no abstract principle but is rather woven into Israel's concrete history, where individuals (e.g., Abraham, Moses, David) represent the people before God. The covenant blessing of God's presence eventually comes to focus on David's house in the figure of a future Davidic king (2 Sam. 7:14-16).<sup>19</sup>

N. T. Wright builds on the notion of incorporative union by arguing that we understand Paul rightly not simply by parsing his parts of speech but by relating his thought to its Old Testament background and, in particular, to the notion that Christos is not Jesus' last name but the title of his office: Messiah.<sup>20</sup> Wright insists that Jesus, as Messiah, “has drawn together the identity and vocation of Israel upon himself.”<sup>21</sup> It is not necessarily that the idea of messianic incorporation was in the first-century Palestinian air (it may not have been), but rather that Paul was led to revise his understanding of the Messiah in light of Jesus' resurrection, for in raising Jesus from the dead, God had done for him what he was supposed to have done for Israel: “He was, in effect, Israel in person.”<sup>22</sup> To be “in the Messiah” – the son of David; the “true Jew” – is to be part of the people defined and ruled by him: “Christos denotes ... ‘the Messiah as the representative of his people,’ the one in whom that people are summed up and drawn together.”<sup>23</sup> In short: the Messiah does what Israel (and Adam) failed to do, and thereby receives the inheritance promised to Adam, Abraham, and David, as does anyone else who is “in” (i.e., represented by and incorporated into) the Messiah. Macaskill comes to a similar conclusion after examining the Isaianic servant songs (especially Isa 53): the servant represents Israel, fulfilling her vocation, “and through him they participate in the narrative of salvation.”<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> One must not confuse this more recent suggestion, which appeals to the nature of the covenant, with earlier theories of “corporate personality” such as that found in H. Wheeler Robinson, *Corporate Personality in Ancient Israel* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1964).

<sup>19</sup> See Macaskill, *Union with Christ*, 103–10.

<sup>20</sup> See the recent study by Matthew V. Novenson, *Christ among the Messiahs: Christ Language in Paul and Messiah Language in Ancient Judaism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012).

<sup>21</sup> N. T. Wright, *Paul and the Faithfulness of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2013), 825

<sup>22</sup> N. T. Wright, *Paul and the Faithfulness of God*, 828.

<sup>23</sup> N. T. Wright, *Paul and the Faithfulness of God*, 834

<sup>24</sup> Macaskill, *Union with Christ*, 126.

# MEDITATING ON METAPHORS OF UNION

Instructions

1. Take each metaphor one by one
2. Reading the passages under each
3. Thinking through the relation being expressed in the metaphors.

Although all metaphors collapse if you take them too far most of us never take them anywhere. So take the time to reflection on these metaphors. It will enrich your understanding of:

- A. What it means to have a relationship with Christ
- B. How we relate to Christ and he to us
- C. How we relate to fellow Christians

## Metaphors used in connection with the concept of Union With Christ

1. The union of a building and its foundation
  - a. Ephesians 2:21-22
  - b. 1 Peter 2:4-5
2. The union of a husband and a wife
  - a. Ephesians 5:31-32
3. The illustration of the Vine and Branches
  - a. John 15:1-5 -
  - b. Col 2:6-7
4. Paul uses the metaphor of the union of the members and the head of the body
  - a. 1 Corinthians 12:12
5. The Two Cooperate Races – In Adam & In Christ
  - a. Romans 5
  - b. 1 Corinthians 15

IN ADAM	IN CHRIST
All Die	All are living
Death Reigns	All reign in life
All sinned	All are righteous
Sin Rules	Grace Rules
Sin enslaves	Slaves of Christ

## Section Three

### Systematic assessment of the doctrine of Union in Christ

#### Introduction

Consider this statement, The resurrection of Christ 2000 years ago and the believers future resurrection are the same event. Jesus is even called the first fruits of the resurrection. But How? How could Something that happened 2000 years ago affect me in the here and now? How could Christ's death and resurrection some 2000 years ago have any relevance for us today in the here and now? That is one of the central questions that union with Christ addresses.

#### Importance of Union in Christ

"The heart of Paul's religion is union with Christ"<sup>25</sup>  
- James S. Stewart

"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"<sup>26</sup> - James S. Stewart

"Union with Christ is...the central truth of the whole doctrine of salvation... It is not simply a phase of the application of redemption; it underlies every aspect of redemption"<sup>27</sup>  
- John Murray

"union with Christ is really the central truth of the whole doctrine of salvation."<sup>28</sup> - John Murray

#### The nature of our union in christ

Helpful Theological categories for our Union with Christ.

1. The Chalcedonian formula is a helpful theological framework for understanding the nature of the believers union with Christ. The Chalcedonian formula is as follows "distinction-without-separation" The hypostatic union can help us understand the nature of our union with Christ. Just as Christ's two natures have a "distinction-without-separation" The hypostatic Union is a union that is distinct without being separate. So too is our union with Christ, it to is a union described as having "distinction-without-separation". Such a formulation protects against the Ontological distinction between the creator and the

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<sup>25</sup> James S. Stewart A Man in Christ (NEW York, Harper. 1955), 147

<sup>26</sup> James S. Stewart A Man in Christ (NEW York, Harper. 1955), vii

<sup>27</sup> John Murray, Redemption—Accomplished and Applied [Eerdmans, 1955], pp. 201, 205.

<sup>28</sup> John Murray, Redemption, Accomplished and Applied (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1955), 161.

creation. In the words of Richard Gaffin: “There is but one union, with distinguishable but inseparable, coexisting legal and renovative aspects.”<sup>29</sup>

2. An Analogy of simplicity shows the wholistic nature of our union with Christ. Union with Christ is to soteriology what the doctrine of divine simplicity is to theology proper. The doctrine of divine simplicity states that God is not composed of composite parts; rather, his being is coextensive with his attributes. God is one whole personality. For example, God does not “have” love; God is love. And now to the analogy: just as God is one, so salvation is simple. Just as each divine attribute gives us a perspective on God's being, so each element of justification, sanctification and all aspects of salvation shines a light on another aspect of our union with Christ. Ferguson uses the *Ordo Salutis* as an example: “Every element in the classical *ordo salutis* is thus a further perspective on the one reality of the believer's union with Christ.”<sup>30</sup>
3. The New Testament uses two interchangeable expressions to describe union with Christ:
  - (1.) We are in Christ (2 Cor. 5:17; John 15:4, 5, 7; 1 Cor. 15:22; 2 Cor. 12:2; Gal. 3:28; Eph. 1:4, 2:10; Phil. 3:9; 1 Thess. 4:16; 1 John 4:13).
  - (2.) Christ is in us (Gal. 2:20; Col. 1:27; Rom. 8:10; 2 Cor. 13:5; Eph. 3:17).

Three passages (John 6:56; John 15:4; 1 John 4:13) explicitly combine both concepts.

## Outline of the doctrine

### MYSTICAL UNION <sup>31</sup>

“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” (Berkhof).

In the terms of the covenant of redemption, Christ was appointed the federal head of God's elect, the last Adam (1 Cor. 15:22, 45), the one who, on behalf of His people, assumes all the obligations under the covenant of works, which the first Adam failed to discharge.

In virtue of this federal union, there is a ground for the legal imputation of our guilt to Him and of His righteousness to us, with the resultant forensic benefits to us of justification\* and adoption.\* Subjectively, or in the experience of the believer, this eternally established union is effected by the Holy Spirit in a supernatural way. Though we often speak of the believer being “united to Christ by faith,” this is not to deny the mystical work of the Spirit in effecting the union; it is, rather, merely an acknowledgment of the fact that by the exercise of saving faith, the believer personally receives Christ and enters into the enjoyment of all the benefits of our union with Him.

When we speak of union, or being “in Christ,” to use the Scriptural phrase, we should remember that we do not use the term to indicate any confusion of personality between Christ

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<sup>29</sup> Richard B. Gaffin, Jr., *By Faith, Not By Sight: Paul and the Order of Salvation* (2d ed.; Phillipsburg, N.J.: P&R Publishing, 2013) 43

<sup>30</sup> Sinclair Ferguson, *Holy Spirit* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1996), 106.

<sup>31</sup> A term mystical was first employed by Calvin and picked up by reformed theologians but does not mean what is traditionally assumed by the word.

and His people. On the other hand, we mean more than a mere association. The Spirit of Christ dwells in the believer and the believer dwells in Christ, in a union which is, therefore—

1. Spiritual (1 Cor. 12:13; 1 John 4:13).
2. Vital—i.e., our spiritual life is sustained by the life of Christ through the indwelling Spirit (Gal. 2:20).
3. Total—i.e., it includes our entire person, spirit, soul, and body (1 Cor. 6:15, 19).
4. Federal and legal, so that all our legal and covenant liabilities rest upon Christ, and all His legal and covenant merit is accrued to us (Rom. 5:12, 18, 19). In other words, by virtue of this union, God treats the believer as He treats Christ (Rom. 8:17).
5. Eternal—i.e., it was laid down in the eternal decree of God and it is, in fact, everlasting, being indissoluble (John 10:28; Rom. 8:35–39). A. A. Hodge sums up: “This union is between the believer and the person of the God-man in His office as Mediator. Its immediate organ is the Holy Spirit, who dwells in us, and through Him we are vitally united to and commune with the whole Godhead, since He is the Spirit of the Father as well as of the Son—John 14:23; 17:21, 23.”<sup>32</sup>

Alan Cairns, “Mystical Union.” Dictionary of Theological Terms,

### **The Redemptive Scope of our union with christ**

Hoekema says that we should see union with Christ “extending all the way from eternity to eternity.” He outlines his material in this way:

1. The roots of union with Christ are in divine election (Eph. 1:3-4).
2. The basis of union with Christ is the redemptive work of Christ.
3. The actual union with Christ is established with God’s people in time.

Under the third point, he shows eight ways that salvation, from beginning to end, is in Christ:

1. We are initially united with Christ in regeneration (Eph. 2:4-5, 10)
2. We appropriate and continue to live out of this union through faith (Gal. 2:20; Eph. 3:16-17).
3. We are justified in union with Christ (1 Cor. 1:30; 2 Cor. 5:21; Phil. 3:8-9).
4. We are sanctified through union with Christ (1 Cor. 1:30; John 15:4-5; Eph.4:16; 2 Cor. 5:17).
5. We persevere in the life of faith in union with Christ (John 10:27-28; Rom. 8:38-39).
6. We are even said to die in Christ (Rom. 14:8; 1 Thess. 4:16; Rev. 14:13).
7. We shall be raised with Christ (Col. 3:1; 1 Cor. 15:22).
8. We shall be eternally glorified with Christ (Col. 3:4; 1 Thess. 4:16-17).

Anthony Hoekema provides further clarification on his view – it is something that extends “from eternity to eternity” can be said to have focus! According to Hoekema, union has its roots in eternity (divine election), its objective basis in the historical death and resurrection of Christ, and its subjective realization in believers in the present temporal flow. <sup>33</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> Alan Cairns, “Mystical Union.” Dictionary of Theological Terms, rev. and enlarged ed.,(Greenville, SC: Ambassador–Emerald, 2002) 293.

<sup>33</sup> Anthony A. Hoekema, Saved by Grace (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989), 54–55.

## Six things to know about Union with Christ

1. Justification is a magnificent benefit of being united to Christ.

We are not united to Christ because we have been justified. It is quite the other way around: we are justified because we have been united to Christ, who is himself our justification (1 Cor. 1:30). We receive Christ's benefits precisely and only because we receive Christ. Martin Luther knew this well: "But so far as justification is concerned, Christ and I must be so closely attached that He lives in me and I in Him. What a marvelous way of speaking! Because He lives in me, whatever grace, righteousness, life, peace, and salvation there is in me is all Christ's; nevertheless it is mine as well, by the cementing and attachment that are through faith, by which we become as one body in the Spirit."

2. Sanctification is a magnificent benefit of being united to Christ.

Christ is our justification, and he is no less our sanctification (1 Cor. 1:30). Thus, united to him, we are not only forgiven and accounted righteous, we are also transformed into his holy image. In giving us himself, Christ will no more leave us condemned and guilty (unjustified) than he will leave us corrupted and depraved (unsanctified). This is because, as Calvin so incisively put it, "Christ cannot be divided into pieces." Jesus is not a partial Savior of a piecemeal gospel. When we are joined to Christ, we receive all of who he is for us.

3. Adoption is a magnificent benefit of being united to Christ.

Christ's self-giving is extravagant. He binds us so completely to himself that we come to share in all that he is as Savior. The gift of sharing in his sonship (adoption) is perhaps the most extravagant gift of them all. When we are joined to Christ by the Spirit, we come to share in the love between the Father and the Son—the very same love the Father has for his beloved Son (John 17:23). As such, God the Father loves us no less than he does his own eternal Son. This love is the love of all loves: it is indissoluble, it brooks no opposition, and is endlessly and everlastingly life giving and joyful. In Christ, we really and truly are the sons and daughters of God forever.

4. The Church is constituted by her union with Jesus Christ.

The reality of salvation and the reality of the church are in fact one and the same reality. To be united to Christ is what it means to be saved. At the same time, to be united to Christ is what it means to be the church: the church, after all, is the body and bride of Christ. A distinction, therefore, between a doctrine of salvation and a doctrine of the church can only be but artificial. There is no salvation outside the church, historic evangelicals have always asserted, just exactly because there is no salvation outside of Christ. We are saved in Christ, and we are the church in Christ. It is the same wonderful gospel.

5. Baptism is God's pledge to us of our union with Christ.

In the waters of baptism, God impresses upon our bodies the truth and reality of our incorporation into the death, burial and resurrection of the living Christ. Baptism, in other words, is a visible and tangible experience of the exceedingly good news (gospel) that we have been crucified in Christ's death and raised to new life in Christ's resurrection. Baptism is the sacrament ("mystery") of our new crucified and resurrected identity in Christ Jesus. Baptism is the "gospel in water," allowing us to experience in our bodies the truth that we are immersed forever into Jesus Christ.

6. The Lord's Supper is God's pledge to us of our union with Christ.

In the bread and wine of the Lord's Supper, God impresses in our bodies the truth and reality of our ongoing participation in the living Savior. The Lord's Supper, in other words, is a visible and edible experience of the exceedingly good news (gospel) that Christ dwells in us and that we dwell in him. Christ brought us into the eternal life that he is by giving us himself, and he continues to nourish and sustain us through his real presence. We have really and truly become one with Christ through his gospel, and we continue to receive Christ through the gospel of bread and wine that he has ordained as means of his ongoing presence to his body and bride. "Is not the cup of thanksgiving for which we give thanks a participation in the blood of Christ? And is not the bread that we break a participation in the body of Christ?" (1 Cor. 10:16). Yes, indeed. His body and blood, our salvation.

By Marcus Peter Johnson<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> Adapted from Marcus Peter Johnson's blog <https://www.crossway.org/articles/10-things-you-should-know-about-union-with-christ/> recovered 5/4/2020

## **Living Faith and UNITED WITH CHRIST**

Union with Christ is one of the most extraordinary blessings and privileges of every Christian. That union is forged by the Holy Spirit in the hour of regeneration when He cuts a sinner off from Adam and grafts him into Christ. The Spirit then establishes a spiritual union between Christ and the sinner—a union that is unbreakable, irreversible, and eternal.

All of this is implied when we say that believers are united to Christ by faith. However, this glorious objective truth must also become an experiential reality for us if we are to enjoy its blessed benefits. Objectively, this union is established in the hour of regeneration, but this union with Christ is subjectively established and maintained by the exercise of faith. Only by faith can the believer become conscious of this union and enjoy its benefits.

Though from God's side this union is uninterrupted, from the believer's side the awareness and enjoyment of this union is very much contingent upon the exercise of faith. The more a believer exercises faith, the more he will enjoy the reality and comfort of being united to Christ. Enjoying this union is therefore directly proportionate to our believing appropriation of it. In John 15, Christ lovingly urges His people to abide in Him, saying, "Abide in me, and I in you.... I am the vine, ye are the branches: he that abides in me, and I in him, the same bring forth much fruit" (John 15:4–5). Christ makes it abundantly clear that He desires believers to live in the full awareness and comfort of this union. It is therefore essential that believers exercise faith in the Lord Jesus Christ and His finished work each day afresh. There will be times that such faith is exercised when we are not engaged emotionally—and thus even in the absence of the sweet and tender frames God's children so much enjoy. At such moments we do not feel united to Christ, but by faith we embrace the truth that nevertheless we are united to Christ. What a blessing when we increasingly live by faith. "Faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen" (Heb. 11:1).

## **Union with christ and our sanctification <sup>35</sup>**

### **7. The active benefits of life in union with Christ**

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 that our life is hidden with Christ in God),

we will share

in his promised return (when Christ, who is our life, appears, we also will appear with him in glory) (Rom. 6:14; Col. 2:11-12; 3:1-3).

This is the foundation of sanctification.

It is rooted, not in humanity and their achievement of holiness or sanctification, but in what God has done in Christ, and for us in union with him. Rather than view Christians first and foremost in the microcosmic context of their own progress, the Reformed doctrine first of all sets them in the macrocosm of God's activity in redemptive history. It is seeing oneself in this context that enables the individual Christian to grow in true holiness.

### **2. Ferguson on life in Christ**

Union with Christ is the foundation of all our spiritual experience and all spiritual blessings. These are given to us 'in Christ', and only those who are 'in Christ' ever experience them. Paul emphasizes this particularly in Ephesians 1:3-14 which we previously discussed in connection with the plan of salvation in chapter 2. In the Greek text these twelve verses are in fact one long sentence! Paul is so caught up in his sense of the great blessings of the gospel that he hardly has time to pause for breath. We have been blessed in Christ, he says, just as we have been chosen (v. 4), graced (v. 6), redeemed (v. 7), reconciled (v.10), destined (v. 11) and sealed (v. 13) in Christ. From beginning to end the Christian life is Christ-centred and we are constantly to look to him for all the spiritual provision we need. All spiritual blessings are in him, and it is only as we ourselves, in this Pauline sense, are 'in Christ' that we will find the blessings which are ours in Christ becoming realities in our own experience.<sup>36</sup>

### **3. Spiritually and Union with Christ.**

The believer's transcendent experience of Christ in the present time has been characterized as "union with Christ" — a term which has often shaped discussions of the spirituality of Paul (see Dying and Rising). The term "union with Christ" reflects the extensive Pauline teaching regarding Christ dwelling in and with the believer, and the believer being in and with Christ (see In Christ). But this must be understood from the dual vantage points of the incarnate and risen presence of God in Christ (cf. 2 Cor 5:16), and in the believing community. For Paul, life in the Spirit is directed both from within and from without history. The Spirit of Jesus draws one into conformity to the pattern and model of the incarnate Lord (2 Cor 3:18), whose obedience to God was lived out within the setting of first-century Palestine. Arguments that Paul was not interested in the incarnate ministry of Jesus collapse in the face of Paul's admission that he had persecuted the early followers of Jesus and his subsequent proclamation of the same Jesus as risen (Gal 1:13, 23); there was, for Paul, no separation between the incarnate and risen Lord (see Jesus, Sayings of; Jesus and Paul). Paul teaches that the believer is united in

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<sup>35</sup> Sinclair Ferguson *Christian Spirituality: Five Views of Sanctification* [IVP, 1989], 58

<sup>36</sup> Sinclair Ferguson, *The Christian Life*, (Orlando: Reformation Trust, 2007) 105

the present with the same Jesus who, in the power of the Spirit, became one with humankind, lived in obedience, and suffered and died on a cruel cross outside Jerusalem. But this union with the risen Christ also has a future dimension of glorification with Christ (Rom 8:17–25; 1 Cor 15:35–41; 2 Cor 4:16–17; Phil 3:17–21).

Paul knew himself to be mysteriously united with Jesus in his suffering and death and risen life —but also joined to all those who, by faith in Jesus, were by the Spirit adopted into the family of God as co-heirs with Jesus Christ. Paul was at once dependent upon the disciples of Jesus and upon the Jerusalem church for their witness to Jesus' life and teaching. But he was also an “independent” apostle, who knew himself to be called of God and entrusted with the gospel of Christ to the Gentiles, along with the fuller explication of the meaning of that gospel. Pauline spirituality is simultaneously determined by his experience of Christ within the community of faith and in his more immediate, revelational experience of the risen Lord.<sup>37</sup>

Robert P. Meye, “Union with Christ.” In “Spirituality.” Dictionary of Paul and His Letters,

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<sup>37</sup> Robert P. Meye, “Union with Christ.” In “Spirituality.” Dictionary of Paul and His Letters, ed. Gerald F. Hawthorne, Ralph P. Martin, and Daniel G. Reid, (Downers Grove: IVP, 1993.) 433–36.