

# Union with Christ

*"What God has joined together,  
let no one separate."*

## 1. Introduction - why think about ‘union with Christ’?

a. Because it’s a huge theme in the Bible.

i. *New Testament:*

*"Union with Christ, rather than justification or election or eschatology (study of the end times), or indeed any of the other great apostolic themes, is the real clue to an understanding of Paul's thought and experience."<sup>1</sup>*

ii. *Old Testament*

God dwelling among the Israelites (E.g. Exodus 25:8) is expressed by Jesus in the New Testament as the triune God dwelling with believers (John 14:23)!

b. Because many important people say we should.

i. John Calvin said that union with Christ has “the highest degree of importance” if we are to understand justification correctly.<sup>2</sup>

ii. John Murray wrote that “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>3</sup> “Nothing is more central or basic than union and communion with Christ.”<sup>4</sup>

iii. “There are no benefits of the gospel apart from union with Christ.”<sup>5</sup>

c. Because it’s relatively poorly understood.

d. Because understanding it better will help us in living the Christian life.

E.g. When Paul asks why we should care about fighting sin in the Christian life, Paul’s answer is our union with Christ (Romans 6:2ff)!

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<sup>1</sup> James S. Stewart. ‘A Man in Christ’, p7.

<sup>2</sup> Calvin, ‘Institutes’, 2.16.19

<sup>3</sup> John Murray, Redemption; Accomplished and Applied, 201-205.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid, p161.

<sup>5</sup> Lane Tipton, “Union with Christ and Justification,” in ‘Justified in Christ: God’s plan for Us in Justification’, p34.

## 2. What is union with Christ?

*"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."<sup>6</sup>*

It is the relationship between Christ and the believer.

*"The reality surpasses the ability of human language to describe it. Being united to Christ involves union with the Son of God who himself transcends our finitude... This goes beyond what we can even imagine."<sup>7</sup>*

And so God ‘lisps’ for us.

a. It’s a bit like the relationship between...

- i. The cornerstone and the other stones of building (Eph 2:19-22).
- ii. A vine and its branches (John 15).
- iii. Adam and the human race (Romans 5:12-21, 1 Corinthians 15:19-49).
- iv. The head and the other parts of a person (Eph 4:15-16).
- v. A husband and wife (Ephesians 5:22-33).
- vi. The persons of the trinity in the Godhead (John 14:23, 17:21-23)!

All are varying analogies, each bearing *some* relation to the reality of our union with Christ, whilst not being identical to it. E.g. we do NOT become members of the trinity!

b. In sum, it is “I am in Christ, and Christ is in me”

- i. We are ‘in Christ’ (E.g. 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).
- ii. Christ is in us (E.g. Gal. 2:20; Col. 1:27; Rom. 8:10; 2 Cor. 13:5; Eph. 3:17).
- iii. The New Testament explicitly joins the two three times.
  - 1. *“Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood remains in me, and I in them.”* John 6:56
  - 2. *“Remain in me, as I also remain in you. No branch can bear fruit by itself; it must remain in the vine. Neither can you bear fruit unless you remain in me.”* John 15:4;

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<sup>6</sup> Louis Berkhof, ‘*Systematic theology*’.

<sup>7</sup> Bob Letham, ‘*Union with Christ*’, p1

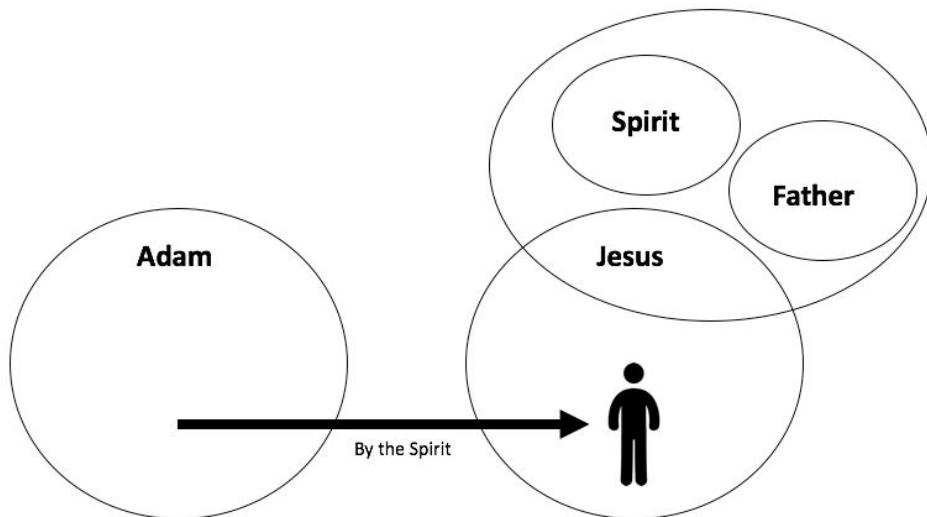
3. "This is how we know that we live in him and he in us: he has given us of his Spirit." 1 John 4:13

*"Once you have your eyes opened to this concept of union with Christ, you will find it almost everywhere in the New Testament"<sup>8</sup>*

### 3. How is union with Christ possible?

- a. Remember the problem - we're born united to Adam (Romans 5:12, Ephesians 2:3)
- b. The incarnation of the new and better Adam!
  - i. He shows us how close a human *can* get to God.
  - ii. He is the federal head of a new humanity, in whom is every spiritual blessing (Eph 1:3).
  - iii. He does everything needed to save us & adopt us.
- c. "Because God has joined himself to us through his Son's assumption of our humanity, we can now experience full and final reconciliation with God being joined to Christ in his crucified and resurrected humanity. The incarnation... allows for us to be joined in Christ to all the he is for us and all, that he has done on our behalf."<sup>9</sup>
- d. The Spirit unites us to Christ (more on this anon).
 

*"...your life is now hidden with Christ in God."* Colossians 3:3



**WARNING**

Don't take your trinitarian theology from this picture - it just illustrates a point!

<sup>8</sup> Anthony Hoekema, 'Saved by Grace', p64.

<sup>9</sup> Marcus Johnson, 'One with Christ', p84-5.

#### 4. 3 ways of thinking about union with Christ

##### a. The roots of our union: divine election (Eph. 1:3-4).

*<sup>3</sup> 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. <sup>4</sup> For he chose us in him before the creation of the world to be holy and blameless in his sight.*

... but we're still born 'in Adam'.

##### b. The basis of union with Christ: the saving work of Christ.

Just listen to Romans 6:1-14.

Paul says we are seen as 'one with Christ' in what he did in his earthly ministry (here it's crucified, buried, and raised up with Christ). What he did, he did on our behalf. E.g. We were (past tense):

- i. Obedient with him (Romans 5:19)
- ii. Crucified with him (Gal. 2:20)
- iii. Baptised into Christ and his death (Rom. 6:3)
- iv. Buried with him (Col. 2:12)
- v. Raised with him in his resurrection (Rom. 6:5)
- vi. Seated with him in the heavenly places (Eph. 2:6)

##### c. The actual union with Christ: established with God's people *in time* - the 'mystical union.'

- i. We still needed to be united to Christ, even after all the Christ had done.

*"First, we must understand that as long as Christ remains outside of us, and we are separated from him, all that he has suffered and done for the salvation of the human race remains useless and of no value for us. Therefore, to share with us what he has received from the Father, he had to become ours and to dwell within us."*<sup>10</sup>

*"Until we are united with Christ, what he has achieved for us helps us no more than an electricity mains supply that passes our house but is not connected to it."*<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Calvin, *Institutes*, 3.1.1

<sup>11</sup> Tony Lane, 'Justification by Faith in Catholic-Protestant Dialogue: An Evangelical Assessment', 23.

This is what the Spirit does.

- ii. **EVERY** blessing of the Christian life is because of our union with the person of 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 have been reconciled in him (Romans 5:10-11).
5. We have been redeemed in him (Eph 1:7),
6. We have been adopted through union with Christ. (Romans 8:15)
7. We are sanctified, and being sanctified through union with Christ (1 Cor. 1:30; John 15:4-5; Eph. 4:16; 2 Cor. 5:17).
  - a. We fight sin through union with Christ (Romans 6:11-12), Colossians 3:1-5).

*"Do you not know that your bodies are members of Christ himself? Shall I then take the members of Christ and unite them with a prostitute? Never! <sup>16</sup> Do you not know that he who unites himself with a prostitute is one with her in body? For it is said, "The two will become one flesh." <sup>17</sup> But whoever is united with the Lord is one with him in spirit <sup>18</sup> Flee from sexual immorality. All other sins a person commits are outside the body, but whoever sins sexually, sins against their own body. <sup>19</sup> Do you not know that your bodies are temples of the Holy Spirit, who is in you, whom you have received from God? You are not your own; <sup>20</sup>you were bought at a price. Therefore honour God with your bodies."* (1 Cor 6:15-20)

8. We are a church together *because* we have been united to Christ:
  - a. 1 Corinthians 12:27, Eph 4:15-16 (Body)
  - b. Ephesians 5:32 (Bride)
  - c. Ephesians 2:19-22 (Building)

Being united in Christ *together* is part of the gospel!
9. We persevere in the life of faith (even through suffering) in union with Christ (John 10:27-28; Rom. 8:38-39).
10. We are even said to die in Christ (Rom. 14:8; 1 Thess. 4:16; Rev. 14:13).
11. We shall be raised with Christ (Col. 3:1; 1 Cor. 15:22).
12. We shall be eternally glorified with Christ (Col. 3:4; 1 Thess. 4:16-17).
13. Etc...

5. Communion with the triune God in Christ.

<sup>3</sup> “We proclaim to you what we have seen and heard, so that you also may have fellowship with us. And our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son, Jesus Christ.” 1 John 1:3

6. Further reading:

- a. John Murray, *Redemption--Accomplished and Applied*. p161-173.
- b. Bob Letham, *Union with Christ*.
- c. Marcus Johnson, *One with Christ*.
- d. John Calvin, *Institutes*, Book 3, chapter 1.

*“Therefore, that joining together of Head and members, that indwelling of Christ in our hearts — in short, that mystical union — are accorded by us the highest degree of importance. We do not, therefore, contemplate him outside ourselves from afar in order that his righteousness may be imputed to us but because we put on Christ and are engrafted into his body — in short because he deigns to make us one with him.”*<sup>12</sup>

*“And if they are one flesh and there is between them a true marriage... it follows that everything they have they hold in common, the good as well as the evil. Accordingly, the believing soul can boast of and glory in whatever Christ has as though it were its own, and whatever the soul has Christ claims it as his own. Let us compare these and we shall see inestimable benefits. Christ is full of grace, life and salvation. The soul is full of sins, death and damnation. Now let faith come between them 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 all the things which are his bride’s and bestow upon her the things that are his. If he gives her his body and very self, how shall he not give her all that is his? And if he takes the body of the bride, how shall he not take all that is hers?”*<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Calvin, *Institutes*, 2.16.19

<sup>13</sup> Martin Luther, ‘The freedom of a Christian’. Written in 1520.