

A THEOLOGY OF UNION:
WHAT IT MEANS TO BELONG TO GOD, IN CHRIST, AND ITS APPLICATION

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ABSTRACT
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What is the nature of the relationship between God and his redeemed people, in Christ? Further, what difference does understanding the nature of this relationship make in the lives of Jesus' people? The nature of this relationship has most often been described as a union or, more specifically, a union with Christ. The purpose of this thesis is to demonstrate that a biblically robust understanding of our union with Christ is vital to the flourishing of Jesus' people, as his disciples and as his church. Union with Christ captures the comprehensive fullness of what God has done for his people as no other doctrine does. Additionally, the every day implications of this profound union are manifold.

This thesis examines union with Christ through an interdisciplinary lens by leveraging systematic, biblical, and historical methodologies. The research reveals a set of prepositions, metaphors, multi-layered relational realities, and developing biblical themes that describe an utterly unique, dynamic, multidimensional, profound relational belonging that God forges with his people, in Christ; we are in him and he is in us. From there, this study considers how this personal and profound union with God, in Christ, is vital to the flourishing of Jesus' people in a variety of areas, including: how we view God, how we see ourselves, how we avoid legalism and licentiousness, our understanding of the local church, how we approach preaching and the sacraments, our prayer life, the battle against indwelling

sin, how we see Jesus as our example, and our perseverance. Throughout, we will discover that it is the highest privilege in the universe to belong to God, *in Christ*.

To Jen

If anyone is *in Christ*, he is a new creation.
The old has passed away; behold, the new has come.
—Apostle Paul, 2 Cor. 5:17

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

The Purpose of this Study

What is the nature of the relationship between God and his redeemed people, in Christ?¹ Further, what difference does understanding the nature of this relationship make in the lives of Jesus' people? The nature of this relationship has most often been described as a *union* or, more specifically, a *union with Christ*.² The purpose of this thesis is to demonstrate that a biblically robust understanding of our union with Christ is vital to the flourishing of Jesus' people, as his disciples and as his church. Union with Christ captures the comprehensive fullness of what God has done for his people as no other doctrine does. As we will see, the every day implications of this profound union are manifold.

What is union with Christ? There is little consensus regarding the precise definition of this union. Theologian Wayne Grudem suggests, "Union with Christ is a phrase used to summarize several different relationships between believers and Christ, through which

¹ The term "nature" here refers to the unique *qualities* of the relationship that God forges with us, *in Christ*.

² There are limitations to the term "union with Christ." While most understand what a "union" refers to, it is not part of the every day vernacular. This tends to reinforce the perception that union is a theological principle best left for academic debate. Further, while the term "union" captures the oneness forged by God, in Christ, with his people, it doesn't convey the living dynamic, or participatory nature, of this relationship. For that reason, others prefer the phrase, "participation" in accord with the early church. This is largely based on 2 Peter 1:4 which states that in Christ we "become *partakers* of the divine nature." The term "participation" does indeed better convey something of the living dynamic of our relationship with God, in Christ. However, it loses the personal closeness that the term "union" captures. A potential solution would be to adapt the phrase "belonging," which simultaneously conveys a sense of oneness and participation. However, for the sake of clarity the usage of "union with Christ" is retained herein, while highlighting the profound belonging it communicates.

Christians receive every benefit of salvation.”³ Rankin Wilbourne posits, “Union with Christ means that you are in Christ and Christ is in you.”⁴ While Constantine Campbell believes it is impossible to define union with a single phrase and, therefore, opts for four terms: union, participation, identification, and incorporation.⁵ Steve Timmis and Christopher De La Hoyde similarly state, “Union with Christ means: location, representation, relationship, and presence with God.”⁶ Meanwhile, Marcus Johnson compellingly argues, “Union with Christ . . . is a collective phrase that is meant to encompass the astonishing number of terms, expressions, and images in the New Testament . . . that refer to the oneness of the believer with Christ.”⁷ Given the vast array of prepositions, images, and theological indicatives employed throughout the Scriptures to describe this union it is no wonder definitional consensus is lacking. However, for the purposes of this thesis, union with Christ will be defined as follows:

Union with Christ refers to the utterly unique, dynamic, multidimensional, profound relational *belonging* that God forges with his people, in Christ; we are *in him* and he is *in us*.

³ Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan, 2004), 841.

⁴ Rankin Wilbourne, *Union with Christ: The Way to Know and Enjoy God* (Colorado Springs, Colorado: David C. Cook, 2016), 43.

⁵ Constantine R. Campbell, *Paul and Union with Christ: An Exegetical and Theological Study* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan, 2012), 413.

⁶ Steve Timmis and Christopher De La Hoyde. *In Christ: In Him Together for the World* (Fearn, Scotland: Christian Focus Publications, 2014), 12.

⁷ Marcus Peter Johnson, *One with Christ: An Evangelical Theology of Salvation* (Wheaton, Illinois: Crossway, 2013), 19.

The Need for this Study

There is significant need for additional study of this union, and its application in the lives of Jesus' people, for the following three reasons. First, unfortunately, most treatments on union with Christ are highly academic, addressing discussions and debates largely consigned to scholarly circles. While these studies are needed and helpful, they frequently have little immediate relevance for the larger church. Pragmatic concerns are ancillary at best. At times, union with Christ is seen in such broad terms that it is viewed with little consequence.⁸ Yet, more often, it is dissected and defined in such a way that what it actually portrays is lost—the incredible nature of our relationship with God, in Christ.

Second, to the average individual, Christianity can appear to be a loose collection of assorted doctrinal facts and figures. For example, there are the beautiful truths of election, calling, justification, sanctification, and glorification. There are the grace-created realities of forgiveness, redemption, and reconciliation. There are the amazing covenantal promises of God. There is the unique person and work of Jesus, the supernatural reality of the church, and the unfolding drama of redemption. Yet, what binds all these together? We need a category for understanding how God, and all that he is for us, can be understood as a whole. Is there a way to do this? Yes, in union with Christ.

⁸ For example, some tend to think of union with Christ as merely an umbrella term. While this doctrine certainly encompasses others, it is not merely an umbrella concept. Saying such is tantamount to dismissing it entirely. This union concerns the nature of the relationship between God and his people, in Christ. We need a category for discussing the nature of this relationship as a whole, not just the constituent parts of the relationship.

Third, popular level work on union with Christ is rare,⁹ and full-length treatments are virtually unheard of,¹⁰ especially when compared to the volume of writing on other aspects of Christian life and doctrine. Why is this? Is it because union with Christ is an abstract theological concept best reserved for scholarly debate? Is it because union with Christ is merely an umbrella concept that points to realities more significant than itself? I don't believe so. The reason is that, despite the contemporary renaissance of interest, union with Christ has been under studied and, even more often, under applied. As one author states, "The one place union with Christ is not prominent today is the one place it most needs to be—the local church."¹¹ This thesis intends to help fill this gap.

The Glory of Our Union

The foundational question governing this study is: How does the Bible describe our relationship with God, *in Christ*?¹² What we find is a set of prepositions, metaphors, multi-layered relational realities, and developing biblical themes that describe an utterly unique, dynamic, multidimensional, profound relational belonging that God forges with his people, *in Christ*; we are in him and he is in us. Jesus described it this way:

I am the vine; you are the branches. Whoever *abides in me* and *I in him*, he it is that bears much fruit, for apart from me you can do nothing (John 15:5).

⁹ In these cases, union with Christ receives a chapter within a book or article-level treatment.

¹⁰ The most recent, and best, attempt at this is *Union With Christ: The Way to Know and Enjoy God*, by Rankin Wilbourne, which is full-length, popular level, treatment on union that was published in 2016. See literature review: Rankin Wilbourne, *Union with Christ: The Way to Know and Enjoy God* (Colorado Springs, Colorado: David C. Cook, 2016).

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 36.

¹² The phrase *in Christ* will be italicized throughout this paper, going forward, in order to keep it at the forefront of the readers attention as the argument develops.

This unique relationship brings us together with Jesus in such a way that we are *in him* and he is *in us*. As such, we don't become God. We don't lose ourselves in God. The Creator-created distinction remains. Yet, even so, an incredibly unique relational oneness is forged with God. It can be startling to Western ears to hear of salvation spoken of in such profound relational terms, especially in contrast to the modern emphasis on forensic justification, but that is exactly how the New Testament (NT) describes it.

The Apostle Paul highlighted this unique relational reality by primarily referring to followers of Jesus as those who are *in Christ*. For Paul, to be *in Christ* is what it means to be a Christian. For example, we have eternal life *in Christ* (Rom. 6:23). We are justified (Rom. 8:1), sanctified (1 Cor. 1:2), and ultimately glorified *in Christ* (Rom. 8:30; 2 Cor. 3:18). We are made alive *in Christ* (1 Cor. 15:22; Eph. 2:5). We are elected (Eph. 1:4), raised (Col. 3:1), and adopted as children of God *in Christ* (Gal. 3:6). For this reason, if “anyone is *in Christ*, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold the new has come” (2 Cor. 5:17; cf. Gal. 6:15). In other words, followers of Jesus are to see themselves in an entirely different way, *in Christ*. Understanding that these salvific benefits are ours by nature of being *in Christ* ensure they do not become an untethered, haphazard, constellation of impersonal truths from which we pick-and-choose. Rather, *together* they highlight the depth and breadth of the unique relationship that God forges with his people, *in Christ*.

The number of terms, images, themes, and expressions that the Scripture uses to describe the nature of our relationship with God, *in Christ*, is astonishing. It is like the relationship of marriage, yet more intimate. It is like the relationship of living stones that are

mortared together, yet more secure. It is like the relationship of the members of a human body, yet more profound. It's like the relationship of a vine to its branches, yet more dynamic. It's like the relationship of a Shepherd to his sheep, yet more personal. Its like the relationship of family members, yet more loving. In other words, the relationship that God forges with his people, *in Christ*, is unlike any other relationship that is available to a human. It is more durable, longer lasting, more personal, profoundly safer, and more meaning-*full* than any relationship this world offers. Union with Christ is not a theological aside, abstract idea, nor mere academic fodder. Union with Christ describes the profound reality of the nature of our relationship with God, *in Christ*. Theologians have long recognized the central importance of this union:

Nothing is more central or basic than union and communion with Christ. . . . Union with Christ is the central truth of the whole doctrine of salvation. ¹³

Union with Christ is right at the center of the Christian doctrine of salvation. ¹⁴

The primary, central, and fundamental reality of salvation is in our union with Jesus Christ, because of which union all the benefits of the Savior flow to us, and through which union all these benefits are to be understood. ¹⁵

Union with Christ—this is the sum and substance of the Christian's status, the definition of his relationship to Jesus, the large reality in which all the nuances of his new being are embraced. ¹⁶

Union with Christ is theological shorthand for the gospel itself. ¹⁷

¹³ John Murray, *Redemption Accomplished and Applied* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 1955), 161.

¹⁴ Robert Letham, *Union with Christ: In Scripture, History, and Theology* (Phillipsburg, New Jersey: Presbyterian & Reformed, 2011), 1.

¹⁵ Johnson, 29.

¹⁶ Lewis B. Smedes, *Union with Christ: A Biblical View of the New Life in Jesus Christ*, Second edition (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 1983), xi.

¹⁷ J. Todd Billings, *Union with Christ: Reframing Theology and Ministry for the Church* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Academic, 2011), 1.

It is difficult to overstate the glory of our union with Christ. It is the purpose of this paper to highlight that a biblically robust understanding of this unique relationship is vital to the flourishing of God's people, *in Christ*.

The Goal of Our Union

However, our union with Christ is *not* the greatest good of Christianity. God is the greatest good. Some critique the doctrine of union for being man-centered. This is because, at times, the emphasis of this doctrine can be placed on us (i.e. what is true of *me*, in Christ) rather than on the one to whom we are united.¹⁸ While this is a worthy concern, it should not cause us to be wary of this doctrine. God is the greatest ground of our joy, not our union. However, understanding the riches of our union helps us to more fully grasp the unsearchable riches of Christ. In other words, "The greatest benefit of union with Christ is Christ."¹⁹ Rightly understood, union with Christ doesn't diminish, but magnifies, the manifold excellencies of God. Todd Billings notes, "The God encountered in union with Jesus Christ is at once more majestic and more intimate than the deistic-tending God of the West."²⁰ Union with Christ reveals that God is not a detached, distant, disinterested deity who dispenses redemptive blessings from afar. Rather, union with Christ reveals that God is personally and profoundly invested in his people. If we want to know our God truly, we must have a biblically robust understanding of the relationship that he offers us, *in Christ*. Being a

¹⁸ John Piper, "What's the Goal of Our Union with Christ?," *Desiring God: Ask Pastor John*, July 16, 2018, <http://www.desiringgod.org/interviews/what-s-the-goal-of-our-union-with-christ>, accessed February 15, 2017.

¹⁹ Michael Reeves, *Rejoicing in Christ*. (Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press Academic, 2015), 85.

²⁰ Billings, 9.

Christian is the highest privilege of the universe as we are joined, in union, with the supreme treasure of the universe, God himself.

Literature Review

Space constraints require the limited nature of this literature review.²¹ Therefore, in light of that, and the interdisciplinary approach of this paper, this review will take a slightly unconventional approach by focusing on the most significant literature on union with Christ published in the last seven years. This will include three academic works (Campbell, Macaskill, and Peterson), two intermediate works (Billings and Johnson), and one pastoral work (Wilbourne).²²

Constantine Campbell

Paul and Union with Christ (2012), by Constantine Campbell,²³ offers a historical survey of union while primarily offering exegetical insights on prepositions and metaphors relevant to union. Campbell's work has become the preeminent contemporary resource for exegetical analysis of themes related to union with Christ in the NT. His exegetical study is paired with a theological investigation that explores how union relates to the work of Christ, the Trinity, justification, and Christian living. Campbell has two major conclusions. The first

²¹ See the bibliography for further recommended reading. For more extensive literature reviews, see: Constantine R. Campbell, *Paul and Union with Christ: An Exegetical and Theological Study* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan, 2012), 413; and, Grant Macaskill, *Union with Christ in the New Testament* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013).

²² Here "academic" refers to works by academics for academics, "intermediate" to works written by academics for pastors and leaders, and "pastoral" to works by pastors for lay people within the local church. These categories are helpful, even while admitting crossover among them.

²³ Constantine R. Campbell, *Paul and Union with Christ: An Exegetical and Theological Study* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan, 2012).

is that the term “union with Christ” is “insufficient to convey all that Paul includes in the theme.” Instead he prefers the terms union, participation, identification, and incorporation.²⁴ His second conclusion is that union with Christ is not Paul’s theological center, nor his “great concern,” but the “essential ingredient that binds all other elements together.”²⁵

Grant Macaskill

Union with Christ in the New Testament (2014), by Grant Macaskill,²⁶ is an excellent broad study of union across the NT that seeks to show the “union between God and humans is covenantal, presented in terms of the formal union between God and Israel.”²⁷ It is from this covenantal vantage point, Macaskill argues, that we see the undercurrents of identification, participation, and presence emerge. He then argues that the imagery of the temple is ideal for holding these themes in tension. He also points to the sacraments as “formal rites of this union, made truly participatory by the divine presence in them.”²⁸ However, Macaskill’s greatest contribution is historical. He spends the majority of his book charting the historical development of union from the patristic period to the Reformation. He

²⁴ Ibid., 29. Campbell correctly comments that the term “union” is not sufficient to capture the comprehensiveness of this doctrine. However, the terms he chooses as replacements are technical, and not inherently relational, therefore misrepresenting the very nature of this union.

²⁵ Ibid., 442. Campbell argues that union is not the center of New Testament salvation while, at the same time, serving as the “essential ingredient that binds all other elements together.” This is contradictory. If union with Christ is understood in terms of a unique, living, and profound relationship with God, as argued herein, then it is fundamentally central.

²⁶ Grant Macaskill, *Union with Christ in the New Testament* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013).

²⁷ Ibid., 1. Macaskill is correct that the nature of our union with Christ is primarily covenantal, however more needs to be said because the nature of God’s covenants with his people develop over the history of redemption. The relational dynamic within each covenant differs. By focusing on the “formal” nature of this union, Macaskill neglects the corresponding “familial” nature of our union with Christ discussed herein.

²⁸ Ibid., 2.

forcefully demonstrates that the eastern fathers were more in line with modern understanding of participation [i.e. union] than they are typically portrayed.

Robert A. Peterson

Salvation Applied by the Spirit: Union with Christ (2014), by Robert A Peterson²⁹ is an excellent introductory work to union with Christ. Part one of *Salvation Applied* considers sightings of union across the whole of Scripture from the Old Testament (OT) through Revelation. Part two shifts to a theological focus, examining union in relation to the redemptive storyline, the Holy Spirit, Jesus Christ, the Church, sacraments, and the Christian life. Peterson adopts Campbell's concepts of identification, incorporation, and participation, and significantly adds, "all of which speak of a relationship between God and his people."³⁰ This seemingly inconsequential comment is strikingly important and something often assumed by scholars.³¹ Peterson's hermeneutical principles for identifying OT foreshadowings of union are simple, insightful, and adopted herein.³² Peterson believes union with Christ can be understood generally and specifically. Generally, union with Christ is the "plan of salvation from eternity to eternity." Specifically, union with Christ refers to "the application of salvation . . . it is both the umbrella over all the aspects of the application of salvation and the glue that holds them together."³³

²⁹ Robert A. Peterson, *Salvation Applied by the Spirit: Union with Christ* (Wheaton, Illinois: Crossway, 2015).

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 20.

³¹ No one would deny that union with Christ deals with the relationship that God creates with his people. Yet, in attempts to understand and articulate the various elements of this union, the *essence of the relationship* is often sacrificed on the altar of scholarly erudition. Peterson helpfully keeps the relational essence at the forefront.

³² *Ibid.*, 20.

³³ *Ibid.*, 428.

J. Todd Billings

Union with Christ: Reframing Theology and Ministry (2011), by J. Todd Billings³⁴ is an extremely helpful book that seeks to build a bridge across the academic-pastoral divide on the matter of union with Christ. Billings persuasively argues that the “God encountered in union with Jesus Christ is at once more majestic and more intimate than the deistic-tending God of the West.”³⁵ With this as his foundational argument, Billings demonstrates how our union with Christ speaks to relevant issues facing the church today, from how union is an “antidote to today’s distance yet convenient deity,” to how union informs our approach to justice, and incarnational ministry. Perhaps his greatest insights are found in chapter two where, taking queues from Augustine and Calvin, he demonstrates that “full humanity is humanity united to God.”³⁶ As such he demonstrates how the condition of “total depravity” is cured, *in Christ*, with “total communion.”³⁷

Marcus Peter Johnson

One with Christ: An Evangelical Theology of Salvation (2013), by Marcus Peter Johnson³⁸ is a well-written and well-researched evangelical introduction to union with Christ. Johnson’s premise is that, “the primary, central, and fundamental reality of salvation is our union with Jesus Christ, because of which all the benefits of the Savior flow to us, and

³⁴ J. Todd Billings, *Union with Christ: Reframing Theology and Ministry for the Church* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Academic, 2011).

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 9.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 38.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 35-62.

³⁸ Marcus Peter Johnson, *One with Christ: An Evangelical Theology of Salvation* (Wheaton, Illinois: Crossway, 2013).

through which union all the benefits are to be understood.”³⁹ His discussion concerning “Whatever happened to union with Christ?” is particularly insightful as he offers suggestions for why union with Christ has faded to the background of modern Christian consciousness.⁴⁰ In chapter two, he demonstrates how our fallen condition “in Adam” is redeemed “in Christ.” Then, in chapters three through six, he examines the interplay between union and the “parts” of salvation, specifically justification, sanctification, adoption, preservation, and glorification. He devotes the last two chapters to considering the practical implications of our union on our ecclesiology. This book is the best place to start for the average pastor who desires to learn more about union with Christ.

Rankin Wilbourne

Union with Christ: The Way to Know and Enjoy God (2016), by Rankin Wilbourne⁴¹ is a popular-level treatment of union and its implications for the every day lives of Jesus’ people. Wilbourne’s work is included here because we need more like it if union with Christ is to, once again, be understood as central to Christian salvation by the average follower of Jesus in our day. The premise of his book is that, “Nothing is more basic or more central to the Christian life than union with Christ.”⁴² Wilbourne divides his work into four parts. Part one deals with the reality of our union and why we need to understand it. Part two demonstrates where union is found in the Bible, considers its historic development, where we

³⁹ Ibid., 29.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 24-28.

⁴¹ Rankin Wilbourne, *Union with Christ: The Way to Know and Enjoy God* (Colorado Springs, Colorado: David C. Cook, 2016).

⁴² Ibid., 23.

lost it, and why we need to recover it. Part three highlights how our union with Christ changes our identity, our future, our purpose, and our hope. Lastly, part four examines what it means to daily live in light of our union. Wilbourne's work is the best place to start for the average lay person.

The Shape of this Study

The purpose of this thesis is to demonstrate that a biblically robust understanding of our union with Christ is vital to the flourishing of Jesus' people, as his disciples and as his church. This study will be divided into four chapters. The first three chapters seek to demonstrate the centrality of God's purpose, in Scripture, to redeem a people and bring them into an utterly unique relationship with him, *in Christ*. Chapter two, *A Systematic Theology of Union*, is a systematic survey of union with Christ from the NT. We will consider relevant prepositions, metaphors, and relational dimensions of this union. Chapter three, *A Biblical Theology of Union*, is a survey of union through a biblical theological lens. We will go about this in two ways. First, we will consider evidences of union across redemptive history. Then, we will determine where we see the relational dimensions of union foreshadowed in the OT. Chapter four, *A History of Union*, is a brief survey of the historical prevalence of union within each major era of the church. In chapter five, *An Applied Theology of Union*, we will consider how a biblical understanding of our union with Christ is vital to the flourishing of Jesus' people.

CHAPTER 2

A SYSTEMATIC THEOLOGY OF UNION

From God's counsels in eternity past before the world was created, to our fellowship with God in heaven in eternity future, and including every aspect of our relationship with God in this life—all has occurred in union with Christ.

—Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology*

Systematic Theology Introduction

We will begin our study of the nature of the relationship between God and his redeemed people, *in Christ*, by developing a systematic theology of union. This will lay the foundation for demonstrating that union with Christ is vital to the flourishing of Jesus' people. This survey will look at a set of prepositions (e.g. *in, into, with, through*), seven metaphors (e.g. new creations, vine and branches, family, marriage, body, temple, and citizens), and seven multi-layered relational realities that, together, describe an utterly unique relationship with God, *in Christ*. What we will discover is that central to Christian salvation is God's desire to profoundly unite a people with Him. We will examine of these components in turn, beginning with prepositions.

Prepositions for Union

My goal in this section is humble. We will consider prepositions, used throughout the NT, along with what they communicate about the relationship forged between a human and God, *in Christ*. This is an important aspect of the work that is not to be overlooked. While

what we can learn from prepositional usage is limited, it remains instructive. How we use language matters. Words communicate realities. Therefore, we should be interested in *how* the authors of the NT speak about being a Christian, even as they do so in ways that aren't intentionally pedagogical. While the details of these realities are spelled out more explicitly in other ways, as we will see, they are nonetheless communicated in generalities through the prepositions that follow. With that in mind, we will look at five of the most prominent prepositional usages that relate to our union with Christ. The first four deal explicitly with references to our lives *in, into, with* and *through* Jesus. The last considers Christ *in* us. The use of the phrase *in Christ* outnumbers the other usages, many times over, therefore that is where we will begin.

“In Christ”

The term “Christian” is found in only three places in the NT.¹ In the book of Acts, Christianity is referred to as “the Way” five times.² Followers of Jesus are referred to as “saints” 61 times. However, the phrase “in Christ”³ [Gk. ἐν Χριστῷ] is by far the most common expression used to describe followers of Jesus, especially by the Apostle Paul.⁴ Some estimate that he uses this phrase, and those like it, 164 times in his letters.⁵ It is so

¹ Acts 11:26; 26:28; 1 Pet. 4:16.

² Acts 9:2; 19:9, 23; 24:14, 22.

³ Including its varied forms, such as “into Christ,” “with Christ,” “through Christ,” *et al.*

⁴ One clear example of this is in Romans 16:17 where Paul speaks of Andronicus and Junia as being “*in Christ* before me” clearly referring to their conversions which took place earlier than his own. In Galatians 1:22 he refers to Christian churches in Judea as “the churches of Judea that are *in Christ*.” See also Eph. 1:1; Phil. 1:1; 4:21; Col. 1:2; and, 1 Thess. 2:14.

⁵ Marcus Peter Johnson, *One with Christ: An Evangelical Theology of Salvation* (Wheaton, Illinois: Crossway, 2013), 19; Campbell gives a count of seventy-three occurrences of the precise phrase ἐν Χριστῷ, yet this number grows when considering other variants.

common, it is easy to miss. There are also a number of variations on this phrase, including, “in Jesus” (9 times), “in the Lord” (52 times), and “in God” (see Eph. 3:9; Col. 3:3; and, 1 Thess. 1:1; 26 times). Why is this phrase used so consistently? Surely this usage indicates there is far more being communicated than prepositional consistency. According to prepositional usage alone, it is evident the authors of the NT believed that everything in the Christian life flows from being *in Christ*. Consider the sampling of what is now true of those who are *in Christ*, in Figure 1.

Even a cursory reading of the NT reveals the preponderance of the phrase *in Christ*. While the phrase itself, and its varied forms, may not explicitly reveal the depths of its meaning, its significance is certain. Paul is intending to communicate something about the unique, personal, and profound nature of what it means to belong to God, *in Christ*.⁶ Before we turn to its meaning however, let’s consider the other prepositions.

“into Christ”

Another preposition Paul utilizes to speak of followers of Jesus is “into”, as in those who have been placed “into Christ” (Gk. εἰς Χριστόν). There are three specific instances of this usage in the NT. The first is in Romans 6:3, where Paul says, “Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized *into Christ Jesus* were baptized *into his death*?” The immediate context for this verse is baptism. However, my aim is to merely highlight Paul’s unique

⁶ Macaskill comments, “While the phrase ‘in Christ’ is deployed in a range of ways, it clearly has a locative sense at many strategic points, where it demarcates a sphere (or state) of existence that is eschatological and that has come to realization in, and through, the incarnational narrative of the crucified and risen Son, sent by the Father.” Grant Macaskill, *Union with Christ in the New Testament* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 249.

reference to a follower of Jesus as one who has been placed “*into* Christ Jesus” and, therefore, “*into* his death.”

Fig. 1. New Testament *in Christ* Usage

In Christ:

we have redemption (Rom. 3:24).
we are to consider ourselves “dead to sin and alive to God” (Rom. 6:11).
we receive the gift of “eternal life” (Rom. 6:23; cf. 2 Tim. 1:1).
we are no longer under condemnation (Rom. 8:1, 2; Gal. 2:4).
nothing “will be able to separate us from the love of God” (Rom. 8:39).
we are “sanctified . . . called to be saints . . . given grace” (1 Cor. 1:2, 4; 15:22).
we are “one body . . . members one of another” (Rom. 12:5; 1 Cor. 12:12).
Christ lives in us (Gal. 2:20) and the Spirit is “poured out on us richly” (Titus 3:6).
we are established, anointed, and sealed by the Holy Spirit as a guarantee. (2 Cor. 1:21).
we are led in “triumphal procession” (2 Cor. 2:14).
God reconciled us to himself and no longer counts our sins against us (2 Cor. 5:18-19).
we are justified by faith and not by works of the law (Gal. 2:16; 5:6).
we become recipients of God’s promised blessings to Abraham by “faith” (Gal. 3:14).
we are adopted “as sons of God, through faith” (Gal. 3:26; Eph. 1:5).
we are given “every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places” (Eph. 1:3).
we are “raised up with him and seated . . . with him in the heavenly places” (Eph. 2:6).
we are created “for good works, which God prepared beforehand” (Eph. 2:10).
we have been “brought near [to God]” (Eph. 2:13).
we are partakers in God’s eternal purposes and promises (Eph. 3:11,16).
we have the mind of Christ (Phil. 2:5; 1 Cor. 2:16).
we “[receive] the righteousness from God that depends on faith” (Phil. 3:9).
we have peace with God (Phil. 4:7) and our needs are supplied (Phil. 4:19).
God’s grace overflows toward us (1 Tim. 1:14; 2 Tim. 2:1).
we have salvation (2 Tim. 2:10) and are called to “his eternal glory...” (1 Peter 5:10).
we are “[equipped] with everything good that [we] may do his will” (Heb. 13:21).
we have been crucified with Christ (Gal. 2:20) and have died with Christ (Rom. 6:8).
we are raised with Christ (Col. 3:1) and are made alive with Christ (Eph. 2:5).
we are made heirs with Christ (Rom. 8:17).
we will rise from the dead (1 Thess. 4:14).
when we die we remain *in Christ* (1 Thess. 4:16) and will be with Christ (Phil. 1:23).

The second usage of the preposition “into” is also found in the context of baptism. In Galatians 3:27, Paul states, “For as many of you as were baptized *into Christ* have put on Christ.” Here again Paul connects being a Christian, to being placed “into Christ”, as expressed in baptism. Now, why this preposition? Baptism controversy aside, Paul is evidently communicating something of the “immersive” nature of what it means to be a Christian. In other words, he is saying that to be a Christian is to be placed “into” a new set of truths, a new relational reality, by being placed “into Christ.”

The final usage of the proposition “into” is found in Ephesians 4:15, “Speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in every way *into him* who is the head, *into Christ*.” Note the difference of Paul’s usage here. In the first two, being placed “into Christ” referred to baptism and, therefore, becoming a Christian. Yet, Paul’s aim here is different. He says, “we are to grow up in every way . . . *into Christ*”⁷ (cf. Col. 1:28). In other words, the context in this passage is not the start of the Christian life but the continuation of it, growing up “into Christ.” His point is not merely that we grow. Rather, he employs this preposition to highlight *who* we are to grow *into* and, by inference, highlights the relational center of this growth.

Taken together, we are baptized “into Christ” and we are to continue to grow “into Christ”. This preposition serves as a pointer to the immersive nature, or the deep personal identification, that is found in the relationship that God forges with his people, *in Christ*.

⁷ Paul says something similar in Col. 1:28, “Him we proclaim, warning everyone and teaching everyone with all wisdom, that we may present everyone mature *in Christ*.” The difference between the two is the preposition, while the same goal is in view.

“with Christ”

In the NT there are eleven instances of the phrase “*with Christ*.”⁸ In four of these usages it is clear the intent of the author is to communicate either the reality of being in Jesus’ physical presence (i.e. “with Jesus”; cf. Phil. 1:23; Rev. 20:4) or associated with a truth that points to Jesus.⁹ Yet, in the remaining seven instances the meaning of “with Christ” is unique. In these cases, “with” points to being personally identified “with” Jesus in his life, death and resurrection. This usage communicates that the lives of Jesus’ people are somehow seen as Jesus’ own life, not spatially but spiritually.

For example, Paul says he has been “crucified *with Christ*” (Gal. 2:20), that “we have died *with Christ*” (Rom. 6:8) and are “raised *with Christ*” (Col. 3:1). Because of this we are “made alive together *with Christ*” (Eph. 2:5), considered “fellow heirs *with Christ*” (Rom. 8:17), and “*with Christ* [we] have died to the elemental spirits of the world” (Col. 2:20). In other words, “[we] have died and [our] life is hidden *with Christ* in God” (Col. 3:3). Of course, Paul is not saying that we were physically crucified and raised with Christ. Paul here is referring to a much more profound identification that Jesus’ people have with him in his life, death, and resurrection. Here again, we are limited by what we can learn from this prepositional usage. However, it is evident that Paul is intending to communicate something about the unique, personal, and profound nature of what it means to belong to God, *in Christ*.

⁸ Rom. 6:8; 8:17; 15:5; 1 Cor. 12:12; Gal. 2:20; Eph. 2:5; Phil. 1:23; Col. 2:20; 3:1, 3; and, Rev. 20:4.

⁹ For example: “in accord with Christ Jesus” (Rom. 15:5); “so it is with Christ” (1 Cor. 12:12); all usages of “with Jesus,” “with the Lord” and “with God” are also used in this manner.

“through Christ”

Next we will consider the preposition “through” (e.g. *through* Christ) which connotes moving from one context to another by means of a mediator. Whereas “in,” “into,” and “with” highlight aspects of our personal identification with Jesus, “through” is used to describe the reality we gain access to through him. John tells us that, “grace and truth came *through Jesus*” (John 1:17). Peter describes the gospel message as “good news of peace *through Jesus Christ*” (Acts 10:36). Paul understood his life and ministry as given him “*through Jesus Christ* and God the Father” (Gal. 1:1). Paul explains that we have access to “eternal life *through Jesus Christ* our Lord” (Rom. 5:21). Astonishingly, God “predestined us for adoption to himself as sons *through Jesus Christ*” (Eph. 1:5). Therefore, *in Christ*, “you are no longer a slave, but a son, and if a son, then an heir *through God*” (Gal. 4:7).¹⁰

“Only *through Christ* is [the veil] taken away” from our hardened minds so that we can know him (2 Cor. 3:14). Further, when we place our faith in Jesus the Holy Spirit is “poured out on us richly *through Jesus Christ* our Savior” (Titus 3:6). He saves his people so that we might be “filled with the fruit of righteousness that comes *through Jesus Christ*, to the glory and praise of God” (Phil. 1:11; cf. Heb. 13:21; 1 Pet. 2:5). *Through Jesus Christ* we are “being built up as a spiritual house, to be a holy priesthood” (1 Pet. 2:5). One day “*through Jesus*, God will bring with him those who have fallen asleep” (1 Thess. 4:14). Therefore, *through Christ* we have comfort (2 Cor. 1:5) and confidence in God (2 Cor. 3:4).

Further, Paul adds, “All this is from God, who *through Christ* reconciled us to himself and gave us the ministry of reconciliation” (2 Cor. 5:18). Therefore, we thank God *through*

¹⁰ This is the sole usage of the phrase “through God” in the NT. Given the proliferation of phrases like “through Jesus” this is yet another pointer to the divinity of Jesus.

Jesus Christ (Rom. 1:8, 7:25). Even more, all glory is due to God, “forevermore *through Jesus Christ*” (Rom. 16:27). God’s goal, from beginning to end, was that “in everything God may be glorified *through Jesus Christ*. To him belong glory and dominion forever and ever” (1 Pet. 4:11; cf. Jude 25).

Note what these passages tell us we receive *through Christ*: grace and truth from God, good news of peace with God, eternal life with God, predestination as sons of God, the Holy Spirit, lives filled with the fruit of righteousness, resurrection, comfort and confidence, and reconciliation. We receive all this *through Jesus* and, in turn, offer back to God thanksgiving and glory *through Jesus*. Yet, we are simultaneously found *in Christ*, baptized *into Christ*, and personally identified *with Christ*. In other words, Jesus is our mediator to whom we are uniquely, personally, and profoundly united.

“Christ in us”

We now turn from the reality of being *in Christ* to the reality of Christ *in us*. While we are addressing this within a section on prepositions, that is not meant to convey that this reality is merely prepositional. However, it is important that we address this here alongside the others. The realities these prepositions point to are not in contest with one another, but offer different vistas of the same reality—the unique, dynamic, multidimensional, profound relational belonging that God forges with his people, *in Christ*. Here we learn that not only are we “in Christ” but Christ is “in us.”

The greatest chapter in the Bible on “Christ in us” is Romans 8. There Paul explains, “the Spirit of God dwells *in you*. Anyone who does not have the Spirit of Christ does not

belong *in him*” (Rom. 8:9, 11). In these two verses we see the *in him* and *in you* dynamic of our union with Christ. Not only are we *in him*, he is *in us* by “the Spirit of God” which he also calls the “Spirit of Christ.” In other words, if you are a genuine Christian, you have Christ dwelling *in you* by the Spirit (Rom. 8:10, 11).

It is striking that when Paul confronts the church at Corinth for ways they are living, he asks them, “Do you not know that you are God’s temple and that *God’s Spirit dwells in you?*” (1 Cor. 3:16). He doesn’t merely exhort them to change. He exhorts them to change based on the profound reality that “God’s Spirit dwells in [them].” He does it again in 2 Corinthians 13:5 where he asks them, “do you not realize this about yourselves, that *Jesus Christ is in you?*” Again, he doesn’t merely tell them to stop, but directs their attention to the profoundly personal and intimate reality of “Jesus Christ in you.”

This mystery of “Christ in you” is so profound that Paul calls it the hope of glory, “God chose to make known how great among the Gentiles are the riches of the glory of this mystery which is Christ in you, the hope of glory” (Col. 1:27). What is the mystery that Paul is speaking of here? In the context of Colossians 1:24-29 the “mystery” is that God saves Gentiles, in Jesus. But, notice the focal point of the “riches of the glory of this mystery.” The focal point is not God’s forgiveness, nor justification, nor adoption, nor a future eschatological reality. The focal point is, “*Christ in you*, the hope of glory,” the profound reality that Christ indwells his people, by the Spirit. Paul must have held a very high of “Christ in us” for he gives it a very privileged position by calling it, “the hope of glory.”

The Apostle John also pointed to this reality to encourage Jesus’ people amidst opposition, “Little children, you are from God and have overcome them, for he who is *in you*

is greater than he who is in the world” (1 John 4:4). John is clearly comparing the greatness of Jesus to the faux-greatness of Satan. Notice how John chooses to encourage Jesus’ people here. He doesn’t merely point to Jesus’ work on the cross, or an attribute of God, or a beautiful promise of God (all of which are valid means of encouragement), but he chose to place the focal point of encouragement on who is “in you.” We will return to the meaning of this later, but we should note the emphasis the Apostles placed on this indwelling reality as a crucial dimension to the relationship that God forges with his people, *in Christ*.

Summary

In this section we saw that everything in the Christian life flows from being found, “*in Christ*.” Further, the phrase “*into Christ*” reveals something of the immersive nature, or the deep personal identification, between God and his people. This reality is heightened with the phrase “*with Christ*” which, in the majority of cases, emphasizes that the lives of Jesus’ people are considered as Jesus’ own life, not spatially but spiritually. “*Through Christ*” conveys the reality of Jesus as our mediator. Lastly, we considered the incredible relational reality that, not only are we found *in him*, he is *in us*. What we see developing here is not a loose collection of theological soundbites, but a picture of an utterly unique, dynamic, multidimensional, and profound relational belonging that God forges with his people, *in Christ*; we are in him and he is in us.

Metaphors for Union

In this section, we will build upon the last, by considering seven metaphors in the NT that reveal something of the nature of the relationship between God and his people, *in Christ*.¹¹ Some argue there are ninety-six such images.¹² Nonetheless, herein we will examine seven that seem to be predominant: new creation (or, new birth), vine and branches, family, marriage, a human body, a living temple, and citizens (or, people of God).¹³ Each of these metaphors convey a brand new relational reality that is brought into being by God with his people, *in Christ*. What is particularly striking is that each of these relational realities contain the same composite parts. Each metaphor is personal yet corporate,¹⁴ dynamic,¹⁵ participational,¹⁶ with Jesus as the vital force animating the relational reality conveyed therein. While some caution is in order when it comes to interpreting metaphors, we shouldn't neglect the reality that each portrays something about the unique relationship created with God, *in Christ*.

¹¹ These images are metaphors in the sense that the relationship between God and his people, in Christ, is *like* a vine and branches, *like* a family, *like* a marriage, *like* a human body, *like* a living temple, and *like* citizens. Jesus is not a bush, nor is the church a biological family, nor a human marriage, nor a human body, *et al*. These images are meant to convey analogous spiritual meaning about the relationship between God and his people, in Christ, that is deeper than the earthly image invoked.

¹² Paul Sevier Minear, *Images of the Church in the New Testament*, New Testament Library (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 2004).

¹³ Others include, a "flock" (Acts 20:28, 29; 1 Pet. 5:2, 3), "olive tree" (Rom. 11:17-24); "field of crops" (1 Cor. 3:6-9), "pillar and bulwark of truth" (1 Tim. 3:15), "harvest" (Matt. 13:1-30; John 4:35), "holy priesthood" (1 Peter 2:5), "house" (Heb 3:6), and more.

¹⁴ Here *personal* means that God relates to his people *personally*, as persons, which effects how they are to understand themselves in light of who He is and all that He is for them, in Jesus. The term *corporate* highlights that God not only deals with his people personally, but together, corporately. In this way, his people are a "community in the transformative presence of God." (Macaskill, 270.)

¹⁵ Here *dynamic* means that each of these relational realities are organic, living, and growing realities as opposed to static, inert, mechanical realities.

¹⁶ Here *participational* means that each of these realities convey a profound interwoven, interrelatedness among its parts and/or persons.

New Creations

In two places, 2 Corinthians 5:17 and Galatians 6:15, Paul refers to those who are *in Christ* as “new creations.” To the church at Corinth he says, “If anyone is *in Christ*, he is a *new creation*. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come.” To the churches of Galatia he says, “For neither circumcision counts for anything, nor uncircumcision, but a *new creation*.” Paul's argument, in both cases, is that what matters is not external religious ritual but being made new, *in Christ*. This relates to the similar image of being “born again.” In John 3, Jesus tells Nicodemus, “Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is *born again* he cannot see the kingdom of God.” Peter tells us that God, “has caused us to be *born again* to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus.” (1 Pet. 1:3; cf. v. 23).

What is Jesus, and the Apostle's, referring to when they speak of being “born again” or being made “new creations”? These metaphors convey the same point. *In Christ*, Jesus' people enter into a whole new realm of being. For example, *in Christ*, we are: justified, forgiven, reconciled, redeemed, adopted, indwelt by the Spirit, made a part of his people, made participants in his purposes, and made joint-heirs of the world to come. These salvific-relational realities are so far-reaching that a follower of Jesus is not merely made “better” or “different” but made “new.” They change how we relate to God, view ourselves, interact with others, and see the world.

In other words, this metaphor demonstrates that to be *in Christ* is to enter into a whole new relational reality, a whole new realm of being, with Jesus as the vital animating force. This relational metaphor conveys a dynamic reality that is experienced personally, as we are individually made new, or born again, yet corporately, as we are made part of God's new

redeemed humanity together, *in Christ*. Further, this reality is participational, highlighting the dependent interrelatedness forged between the life-giver and those made new, *in Christ*.

Vine and Branches

In John 15, Jesus uses the image of a vine and branches to describe how he and his people relate to one another. He says:

I am the vine; you are the branches. Whoever abides *in me* and *I in him*, he it is that bears much fruit, for apart from me you can do nothing (John 15:5).

Jesus is saying that his relationship with his people is akin to the relationship between a vine and its branches. How does a vine relate to its branches? The vine dwells in the branches. The branches dwell in the vine. There is a living, organic, mutual interrelatedness—or, participational dynamic—between the vine and branches. The relationship is profound and deeply interwoven. Who can tell exactly where the vine ends the branch begins? It is through this profound relationship between vine and branch that the branch bears fruit.

Jesus is saying his relationship with his people is like that. Jesus is the vine. His people are the branches. We are one with him, *in Christ*. This relationship is dynamic, in that it is living (not inert), vital (not superficial), and organic (not mechanical). He abides *in us*.

We abide *in him*.¹⁷ By ourselves, we can do nothing. In Christ we are,

in vital, closest union [with God]. No distance. The vine holds nothing back from its branches, pouring all its life into them . . . [whereas] on our own we are but withered sticks.”¹⁸

¹⁷ Of course we must take care when discussing this dynamic. This indwelling is mutual in that Jesus is in his people and his people are in him, yet they are not equal nor of the same substance. The Creator-creature distinction remains. However, in some quarters, fear of confusion on this point has led some to neglect this truth entirely. But, to do so, is to miss the amazing relationship the God forges with his people, *in Christ*.

¹⁸ Michael Reeves, *Rejoicing in Christ*. (Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press Academic, 2015), 98.

Jesus chose this image purposefully. This metaphor reveals that to be *in Christ* is to enter into a whole new relational reality with God, like a vine and branches. This metaphor conveys a dynamic relational reality that is experienced personally, as an individual branch, yet corporately, as part of the whole. Further, this reality is participational, highlighting the dependent interrelatedness forged between the vine and branches, with Jesus serving as the vital force animating this reality.

Family

One of the most significant metaphors used in the NT to describe Jesus's people is as that of a family. Paul said to the church at Ephesus, "You are no longer strangers and aliens, but . . . members of the *household of God*" (Eph. 2:19). Here household refers to an extended family. Or, to the churches in Galatia he wrote, "Let us do good to everyone . . . especially to those who are of the *household of faith*" (Gal. 6:10). Again, highlighting that the church is a family, the family of God, with God as Father and Jesus as brother (Heb. 2:11; Rom. 8:29). God is referred to as "Father" roughly 250 times in the NT. Christians are referred to as God's "children" twenty times. Fellow Christians are called "brothers and sisters" *in Christ* ninety-nine times.

This imagery of family is reinforced by the reality that we are "adopted" as sons and daughters, *in Christ* (Rom. 8:15, 23; Gal. 4:5). We don't belong to God's family by nature, or choice, but by adoption. We don't choose this family any more than an adopted child chooses theirs. Rather, "he predestined us for adoption to himself as sons through Jesus Christ, according to the purpose of his will" (Eph. 1:5). This family isn't defined by human blood,

but Christ's blood; not by genealogy, but by the Spirit. This is why Jesus redefined family saying, "Whoever does the will of my Father in heaven is my brother and sister and mother" (Matt. 12:46-50).

The family image is significant on a number of levels. First, it reveals that Jesus didn't come to merely save a loose collection of individuals, but to create a new people, a new redeemed family. Second, this familial image reveals that God wishes to relate to us, not as an impersonal, abstract deity, but personally as a Father.¹⁹ Third, this familial image implies intimacy and interrelatedness—or, participation—among all members of the family. This has significant implications for how we relate to God and other followers of Jesus.

Yet again we see that this metaphor reveals that to be *in Christ* is to enter into a whole new relational reality with God, like a family. This metaphor conveys a dynamic familial reality that is experienced personally, as an individual family member, yet corporately, as part of the whole. Further, this reality is participational, highlighting the dependent interrelatedness forged among family, with Jesus as the vital formative force.

Marriage

The next metaphor we will consider is marriage. Marriage is the most intimate human relationship that exists between two humans. In marriage, a husband and wife are spiritually, emotionally, and physically interwoven as one to form a profoundly unique, dynamic, life-

¹⁹ Billings notes, "Paul's overall usage of the adoption metaphor describes both the legal dimension of being transferred into God's family and the transformative dimension of growing in God's family. By associating adoption only with justification, theologians have sometimes tended to emphasize the legal at the expense of the transformative side of adoption . . . the forensic sense of becoming adopted does not exhaust the meaning of Paul's metaphor, because the result of that act is that one is adopted to be a son or daughter of God, placed in security of God's family." J. Todd Billings, *Union with Christ: Reframing Theology and Ministry for the Church* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Academic, 2011), 20.

long participational relationship (Gen. 2:24; cf. Matt. 5:5; Eph. 5:31-32). Throughout the Bible, God regularly refers to his people as his bride. This theme reaches its climax in Ephesians 5. There Paul reveals that marriage wasn't created as an end in itself, but to point to an even deeper reality, the relationship between Jesus and his bride, the Church: "This mystery is profound, and I am saying that it refers to Christ and the Church" (Eph. 5:32). In other words, the relationship between a husband and wife in marriage is a shadow of the greater relationship between Jesus and the Church.²⁰ Marriage is a copy. Jesus and the Church are the original.²¹

The means that marriage was instituted by God to be a living, breathing drama that displays something of the nature of the relationship between Christ and his people. Marriage wasn't an afterthought, nor accident, nor a cultural institution. Marriage was intentionally crafted by God to display the glory of Jesus in rescuing and redeeming his bride, the Church. This metaphor, as with the others, reveals that to be *in Christ* is to enter into a whole new relational reality with God, like a bride to a bridegroom. This relational metaphor conveys a dynamic reality that is experienced personally, as one loved by God, yet corporately, as part of his beloved Bride. Further, this reality is participational, highlighting the dependent interrelatedness forged between husband and wife.

²⁰ Further, this is why marriage doesn't exist in the resurrection, as Jesus says in Mark 12:25, because the shadow is longer needed once you've reached the substance.

²¹ Some of this language is adapted from John Piper, *This Momentary Marriage: A Parable of Permanence* (Wheaton, Illinois: Crossway, 2012).

Human Body

We now move onto the metaphor of the Church as a human body. In 1 Corinthians 12,

Paul writes:

For just as the *body* is one and has many *members*, and all the *members* of the *body*, though many, are one *body*, so it is with Christ. For in one Spirit we were all baptized into *one* body. . . . For the *body* does not consist of one *member* but of many. . . . As it is, there are *many parts*, yet one *body*. . . . Now *you are the body of Christ* and *individually members of it*. (1 Cor. 12:12-13, 14, 20, 27; cf. Rom. 12:4; Col. 1:24; Eph. 1:23; 4:12; and, 5:30)

What can we learn from this metaphor? In many ways it is like the others we have already considered. How do the individual members of our bodies (e.g. finger, hands, arms, toes, feet, and legs) relate to one another? Our body members are not casually, nor independently, related. Rather, they are personally and profoundly interrelated. There is a dynamic participation among the members of a body. As with the vine and branches, it can be difficult to know where one member ends and the other begins. In like manner, to be *in Christ* is to be uniquely, vitally, interrelated to Christ and his people. Literally, members of the body need one another to survive, but they supremely need the head, which is Christ (Eph. 4:16).

This metaphor, as with the others, reveals that to be *in Christ* is to enter into a whole new relational reality with God, as members of a body. This relational metaphor conveys a dynamic reality that is experienced personally, as an individual member, yet corporately, as part of the body as a whole. Further, this reality is participational, highlighting the dependent interrelatedness forged between parts of the body, *in Christ*.

Living Temple

The next metaphor is the church as the temple of God.²² Paul says those *in Christ*, “Are the temple of the living God” (2 Cor. 6:16). To the church at Ephesus he says, “In [Jesus] you also are being built together into a dwelling place for God by the Spirit” (Eph. 2:22). Peter, too, uses this metaphor saying, “You yourselves like living stones are being built up as a spiritual house” (1 Pet. 2:5). The image portrayed here is that of a massive, living temple being built by God across the ages. It is a structure unlike any other, entirely unique. Jesus is the Cornerstone (Eph. 2:20; 1 Pet. 2:6, 7). The apostles and prophets laid the foundation. And all who repent of their sin and embrace Jesus by faith are added to it—as living stones—to form a new temple.

In the OT, God’s presence was primarily manifested in the tabernacle in the wilderness and later in the temple in Jerusalem. *In Christ*, however, there is no longer a need for a physical temple. Jesus is our temple (i.e. the place where we uniquely meet God) and, by nature of our relational union with him, the church becomes a living dwelling place of God where he makes himself known to his people and, through them, the world.

The implications of this metaphor are significant. These living stones do not exist in isolation, as solitary stones, nor in casual relationship with one another. These stones are intended to be cemented *together* in mutually interrelated relationships, while taking their queue from the Cornerstone. In other words, this metaphor reveals that to be *in Christ* is to enter into a whole new relational reality with God, like living stones. As with the others, this

²² Macaskill sees this as a dominant theme and one that merges many aspects of union into a single image for, “it maintains the distinction between God and the creatures present in the temple, while allowing his glory to be shared with them; it is covenantal, and specifically related to the Spirit-promises of the new covenant; and it involves a particular union between believers and the Messiah.” (Macaskill, 12.) His insights are helpful and worthy of consideration, even if he overemphasizes the temple motif.

relational metaphor conveys a dynamic reality that is experienced personally, as an individual stone, yet corporately, as part of the living temple. Further, this reality is participational, highlighting the dependent interrelatedness forged between the living stones as God's dwelling place, *in Christ*.

Citizens

The last metaphor we will consider is that of citizenship within the kingdom of God. The kingdom of God was at the center of Jesus' teaching. In fact, he began his ministry with the announcement, "The time is fulfilled, and the *kingdom of God* is at hand" (Mark 1:15). From there, "He went throughout Galilee, teaching... and proclaiming the gospel of the *kingdom*" (Matt. 4:23; 9:35; 24:14). The Apostle Paul picked up this theme when we wrote, "[God] has delivered us from the domain of darkness and transferred us to the *kingdom* of his beloved Son" (Col. 1:13). In light of this we are, "no longer strangers and aliens, but . . . fellow *citizens*" (Eph. 2:19) meaning that, "our *citizenship* is in heaven" (Phil. 3:20).

In other words, when one places faith in Jesus, they enter into the new relational reality of being a citizen of the kingdom of God under the gracious rule of King Jesus, who is the Lord of Lords and King of Kings (Rev. 17:14). Whereas before we were citizens of the "domain of darkness," we have now been transferred into the "kingdom of his beloved Son" (Col. 1:13). By nature of this kingdom-transfer, we are recipients of all the benefits achieved by King Jesus. As with the others, this metaphor reveals that to be *in Christ* is to enter into a whole new relational reality with God, as citizens of the kingdom of God. This relational metaphor conveys a dynamic reality that is experienced personally, as an individual

citizen, yet corporately, as part of the citizenship of the kingdom. Further, this reality is participational, highlighting the dependent interrelatedness forged between the King and his people, *in Christ*.

Summary

In this section we considered seven metaphors that reveal something of the nature of the relationship between God and his people, *in Christ*. Each metaphor is striking by itself. (For a synopsis of these metaphors see Table 1.) Yet, our relationship is not fully captured by any single one. It takes *all* of them to communicate the nature of the relationship that God forges with his people, *in Christ*. It's like being born again, or how a vine relates to its branches, or relating as members of a family. It's like a marriage between a husband and wife, or how individual members of our bodies relate to one another. It's like living stones being built up into a living temple. Its like being citizens of a kingdom. Taken together, what is being described is a radically new relationship that is utterly unique, personal yet corporate, dynamic, participational, with Jesus as the vital animating force.

Table 1. New Testament Metaphors for Union

Metaphor	Relational Reality	Individual	Corporate	Status	Participational	Jesus as Vital Force
<i>New Creations</i>	New birth	Born again	New humanity	Dynamic	Designedly	Life-Giver
<i>Vine & Branches</i>	New engrafting	Branch	Branches	Dynamic	Organically	Vine
<i>Family</i>	New adoption	Member	Family	Dynamic	Familially	Adopter
<i>Marriage</i>	New relationship	Personally loved	Bride	Dynamic	Maritally	Husband
<i>Body</i>	New body	Member	Body	Dynamic	Bodily	Head
<i>Temple</i>	New living temple	Living stone	Temple	Dynamic	Structurally	Cornerstone
<i>Citizens (or, people of God)</i>	New citizenship	Citizen	Kingdom	Dynamic	Monarchically	King

Dimensions of Union

In this section, while keeping the prepositional and metaphorical realities we have already discussed in view, we will continue to examine the nature of the relationship that God forges with his people, *in Christ*. What do other passages say about the nature of this unique relationship? Herein we will look at seven, overlapping, relational dimensions of union with Christ. It is crucial to highlight that these are fundamentally *relational* in nature. While each dimension is inseparably related to the others, it is worth examining each, to the extent we

can, to get a sense of the richness of the relationship forged, *in Christ*. Yet, even while we do, we must keep the relationship as a whole in view, for the sum is greater than its parts.²³

Analyzing our union is somewhat akin to analyzing a beautiful marriage; it doesn't seem right. This is often, though not always, where academic work on this subject falls short. Scholars often offer helpful insights, while at the same time neglecting to emphasize the incredible relational nature of the reality being studied. Surveying the unique relational dimensions of our union with Christ is more akin to visiting different vistas within the same mountain range, with each offering a uniquely beautiful view of the whole. Since these dimensions are by definition *relational*, I have attempted to frame them in relational categories.²⁴

In Christ, we: (1) are represented *by* him, therefore given a new identity, (2) are found *in* him, therefore identified with his saving work, (3) belong *to* him, therefore profoundly united to him, (4) present *with* him, therefore given unmediated access, and (5) indwelt *by* him, with his personal presence within. This union is both (6) personal and corporate, and (7) present and future. Dimensions (1) and (2) are *forensic* by nature, counting Jesus' achievements as our own. Dimensions (3), (4), and (5) are *familial* by nature. Dimensions (6) and (7) are *contextual*, framing the bounds of the relationship. We must keep in mind that

²³ Union with Christ is fundamentally covenantal (i.e. new covenant). "Covenant provides a framework within which the bond between God and his people can be conceived and, internal to this principle relationship, by which the identification [speaking forensically] of covenant participants can be achieved." (Macaskill, 127.) Again, "[the] covenantal framework must serve as the starting point for reflection on participation or union with Christ." (Macaskill, 298.) Yet, we must not leave our knowledge of union there. It is right to associate our union with Christ primarily as a covenantal reality. Yet, we need to be clear what we mean by that as the nature of relationship offered to us by God, *in Christ*, is so unlike previous covenantal realities.

²⁴ This is in contrast to purely technical categories.

these are not separate, isolated redemptive truths, but belong to the comprehensive whole of what it means to be *in Christ*.

Represented *by* Jesus

The first relational dimension we will consider is Jesus' representation of his people which is most clearly described in Romans 5:12-21. We begin here because this is the broadest category for us to consider. All other dimensions ultimately fall within it. In this important passage, Paul reveals that all of humanity is represented by one of two covenantal heads.²⁵ We are either *in Adam* or we are *in Christ*. Paul explains, "sin came into the world through one man [Adam], and death through sin, and so death spread to all men because all sinned" (Rom. 5:12). In other words, Adam is the representative head of all of humanity. His actions set the trajectory of human experience. Therefore, when he sinned, as our representative head, we all sinned. It was not merely Adam's life that was impacted, but all of our lives. Our sin, and its consequences, is a result of being *in Adam*. But that is not the end of the story. Paul continues:

but the free gift [of Jesus] is not like the trespass [of Adam]. For if many died through one man's trespass [that is, in Adam], much more have the grace of God and the free gift by the grace of that one man Jesus Christ abounded for many [that is, in Christ]. . . . If, because of one man's trespass, death reigned through that one man [in Adam], much more will those who receive the abundance of grace and the free gift of righteousness reign in life through the one man Jesus Christ [in Christ]. . . . As one trespass led to condemnation for all men [in Adam], so one act of righteousness leads to justification and life for all men [in Christ]. For as the one man's disobedience the many were made sinners [in Adam], so by the one man's obedience the man will be made righteous [in Christ] (Rom. 5:15,17-19).

²⁵ We will speak of covenants more fully in chapter three, *A Biblical Theology of Union*.

Paul is driving home the matter of representation. In Adam, there is sin, condemnation, and death. *In Christ*, there is righteousness, justification, and life. In Adam, death reigned. *In Christ*, life reigns. Jesus came to serve as a new representative head for a new humanity. As head, all that Jesus accomplished is now counted true of those who are his. His life is their life. His death is their death. His victory is their victory. His achievements are their achievements. We don't stand alone before God. Why? Because we are *in Christ*. *In Christ*, we receive an entirely new identity, a new standing before God, because we are represented by Jesus.²⁶ As one author put it, "Union with Christ tells you a new story about who you are."²⁷ See Figure 2 for a survey of what this new identity entails. Everything that was lost *in Adam* is regained *in Jesus*. The following relational dimensions are an outworking of his profound representation.

²⁶ This is the point Paul is making in Gal. 3:28 where he states, "There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is no male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus." (cf. Eph. 2:13-22)

²⁷ Rankin Wilbourne, *Union with Christ: The Way to Know and Enjoy God* (Colorado Springs, Colorado: David C. Cook, 2016), 21.

Fig. 2. Our Identity *in Christ*

In Christ we are:

Victorious over Satan, sin and death (1 Cor. 15:57; 2 Cor. 9:15; Rom. 7:23-25; 2 Cor. 2:14)
Redeemed from slavery to sin (Rom. 3:24; 8:23)
Saved from and forgiven of all our sins (Col. 1:14; 2:13).
Adopted by God as his children (John 1:12, Eph. 1:5; Rom. 8:15)
Accepted (Eph. 1:6) and brought close to God (Eph. 2:13)
United to Jesus (Col. 2:9-10)
Possess every spiritual blessing (Eph. 1:3)
Delivered from the power of darkness (2 Cor. 4:3-4; Col. 1:13)
Receive citizenship in heaven (Eph. 2:19; Phil. 3:20)
Friends of God (John 15:15) and saints (Eph. 1:1).
Hidden with Jesus in God (Col. 3:3) and made complete (Col. 2:10)
Seated with him in the heavenly kingdom (Eph. 2:6).
Established, chosen and holy (2 Cor. 1:21-22).
Forever in the love of God (Rom. 8:35-39).
No charges stand against us (Rom. 8:31-34).
Assured that all things work together for good (Rom. 8:28).
Forever free from being ruined (Rom. 8:1-2).
Able to go to God by the Spirit (Eph. 3:12; 2:18)
A recipient of grace and mercy (Heb. 4:16).
Fully reconciled to God (2 Cor. 5:18)
Able to do all things through him (Phil. 4:13).
Bought with a price and belong to God (1 Cor. 6:19-20)
Free from the devil (1 John 5:18; Col. 2:14-15; 1 John 3:8)
At peace with God (Rom. 5:1)
In one Spirit with God (1 Cor. 6:17).
God's co-worker (2 Cor. 6:1; 1 Cor. 3:9)
God's temple (1 Cor. 3:16)
A personal witness of God (Acts 1:8).
Chosen to bear fruit (John 15:16)
A branch of the true vine (John 15:1-5)
A member of his body (1 Cor. 12:27; Rom. 12)
A member of the family of God (Gal. 6:10; Eph. 2:19)
Given access to God (Heb. 4:16; 10:10-20)
Become an inheritance (Eph. 1:6, 18)
Receive an inheritance (Eph. 1:14; Col. 3:24; 1 Pet. 1:4; Heb. 9:15)
Light of the world (Eph. 5:8)
God the Father is in you by the Spirit (Eph. 4:6)
You are in the Son (Rom. 8:1) and the Spirit (Rom. 8:9)
The Son is in you (John 14:20) and the Spirit is in you (1 Cor. 2:12)
Called to bring people together for God (2 Cor. 5:17-21)
Able to participate in his unfolding story (Matt. 28:18-20)
Sent as Jesus was sent (John 17:18).
Perfectly loved (Rom. 5:7-8; Jn 3:16; Eph. 1:7, 5:2, 5:25)
No longer under God's wrath (Gal. 3:13; Rom. 3:25)
Declared, "Not guilty!" (Rom. 5:9, 3:24, 3:28)
Reconciled to God and others. (Rom. 5:10; 2 Cor. 5:28; Eph. 2:16; Col. 1:20)
Entirely cleansed and forgiven. (Eph. 1:7; Matt. 26:28; Ps. 103:12)
Free from the fear of death. (Heb. 2:14-15)
Part of God's people, the church. (Luke 9:23; Matt. 10:38; Rev. 5:9; John 10:16)
Free from slavery to sin (Rev. 1:5-6; Heb. 13:12)
Brought home to God. (Rom. 5:10; 1 Pet. 3:18; Eph. 2:13; Rom. 7:4; 1 Cor. 6:19-20)
Declared 100% righteous (2 Cor. 5:21; Rom. 5:19; Phil. 3:9)
A recipient of eternal life . . . which is knowing him. (John 3:16; 17:3)

Found *in* Jesus

The second relational dimension of union is the profound reality that we are found in, or deeply identified with, Jesus. This dimension personalizes Jesus' representation of us.²⁸ A passage that highlights this unique truth is Galatians 2:20:

I have been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me.²⁹

Here Paul is pointing to the reality of being found *in Jesus*. He says, "I have been crucified with Christ." In what sense did he understand himself to be crucified? Clearly, he is not speaking of his own crucifixion alongside Jesus. Rather, Paul is saying that he is now *found in* Jesus in such a way that Jesus' crucifixion, and by inference all that Jesus achieved through it, is counted as his own.

When we "live by faith in the Son of God" our life is now *found in* him. Jesus' life is counted as our life. Jesus' crucifixion is counted as our crucifixion. Jesus' resurrection is counted as our resurrection. Jesus' ascension is counted as our ascension. Through faith *in Christ*, we are found in him, being personally identified with him and his saving work. *In Christ*, our lives are now interpreted through his life, "Your life, your story, becomes enfolded by another story—Another's story."³⁰ This is why Paul says, "*It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me.*" When he says, "It is no longer *I* who live", the "I" he is

²⁸ While these two relational dimensions relate, they are distinct. It's the difference between a king generally representing his people and king personally identifying with his individual people. The former doesn't necessitate the latter, therefore these dimensions should be treated separately.

²⁹ There are actually a number of dimensions of our union highlighted in this single verse. For example, Paul mentions, "Christ lives in me" referring to Spirit's indwelling. We will examine this more closely in the pages to come. But, for now, I want to draw our attention to how this verse speaks of us being "found in" Jesus.

³⁰ Wilbourne, 47.

pointing to is his life apart from God.³¹ Rather, he juxtaposes that kind of life with, “Christ who lives in me.” (In context, this is Paul’s shorthand for the unique relationship that God forges with his people, *in Christ*.) His life is no longer “I” but “Christ who lives in me.” His life is no longer found apart from Christ but profoundly and personally, in him. In Colossians, Paul says it this way, “You have died, and your life is *hidden with Christ* in God.” (Col. 3:3) *In Christ* we are found in him.

Belong to Jesus

The third relational dimension is that, *in Christ*, we belong to him. As we proceed, the overlapping nature of these dimensions will become increasingly evident. However, their distinctiveness is worth highlighting. Whereas the first two relational dimensions are primarily forensic, the proceeding dimensions are familial. This can’t be underscored enough. Union with Christ is simultaneously forensic and familial; not purely legal, but simultaneously profoundly relational.³² *It is a profoundly personal relationship that is*

³¹ Luther asks, “Who is this [I]? It is I, an accursed and damned sinner, who was so beloved by the Son of God that He gave Himself for me.” Martin Luther, *Lectures on Galatians, 1535: Chap. 1-4*, eds. Jaroslav Jan Pelikan and Helmut T. Lehmann (Saint Louis, Missouri.: Concordia Publishing House, 1963), 176.

³² This is worthy of additional exploration, should space allow. It is fascinating to revisit the metaphors for the relationship between God and his people, *in Christ*, with this forensic-family, or legal-relational, paradigm in view. Each metaphor has both a forensic/legal element (i.e. our legal standing before God, *in Christ*) and familial/relational element (i.e. our deep belonging to God, *in Christ*). These are not in contest with one another, but find their shared source, *in Christ*. Often, in our defense of forensic justification we lose sight of the depth of belonging that is ours, *in Christ*. Vanhoozer highlights this when he suggests, “that adoption is one way to expressing what it is to be “in Christ” that bridges present and future, the forensic and the familial.” Nicholas Perrin, Richard B. Hays, and N. T. Wright, eds. *Jesus, Paul, and the People of God: A Theological Dialogue with N. T. Wright* (Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press Academic, 2011), 256.

*legally formalized.*³³ Jesus famously said:

[I ask] for those who will believe in me . . . that they may all be one, just as you, Father, are in me, and I in you, that they also may be in us. . . . The glory that you have given me I have given to them, that they may be one even as we are one, I in them and you in me, that they may become perfectly one, so that the world may know that you sent me and loved them even as you loved me. . . . I made known to them your name, and I will continue to make it known, that the love with which you have loved me may be in them, and I in them (John 17:20, 21-23, 26).

There are many elements of this passage we could discuss, but for our purposes let's consider two. First, Jesus is clearly referring to a mutual indwelling, or dynamic participation, that God desires to have with his people. This is emphasized with the language of oneness, "I in them and you in me, they they may become perfectly one." The Father and Jesus are one (v. 21, 22). In fact, the Father is in Jesus and Jesus is in the Father (v. 21). Jesus prays that his people would be one, in like manner (v. 21, 22, 23). But, this is not merely about relational unity among Jesus' people, it is about mysteriously sharing in the oneness of God which is made possible by Jesus being "in them" (v. 23, 26). Jesus is inviting his people into the relational intimacy that he experiences with the Father. What is being described here is a profound oneness, or belonging, to God in Jesus. He says something similar in John 14:20, "I am in my Father, and you in me, and I in you." Paul emphasized this oneness when he says, "He who is joined to the Lord becomes *one spirit with him*" (1 Cor. 6:17).

Second, by virtue of our union with Jesus we are loved by the Father just as Jesus is loved by the Father (v. 23). This is a staggering, almost incomprehensible, statement. There is no greater personal intimacy and shared love that exists than between the Father and the Son.

³³ Macaskill attempts to express this reality by saying that union with Christ has "irreducibly forensic dimensions, and the human experience of these is not a matter of remote transfer or imputation of status or credit, but of the personal presence of this Righteous One within his people . . . salvation is not a matter of receiving benefits secured by Christ, but receiving Christ himself, and with him those benefits." (Macaskill, 98.)

Yet, Jesus reveals here that the Father loves his people as he loves his Son. In other words, *in Christ*, we are mysteriously brought into the most personal, intimate, and loving union in the universe. The level of loving belonging captured by our union with Christ is incomparable. We belong, in the most profound sense possible, to God.

This is an important clarification as, technically, it would be possible for God to *impersonally* represent us. But, it is not so. The living God is a personal God who makes us one with him, *in Christ*, the ultimate act of belonging. This reveals that salvation is profoundly personal. Often, salvation is thought of as:

the reception of something Christ has acquired for us rather than the reception of the living Christ. . . . [In this way] the gospel is portrayed as the offer of a depersonalized benefit (e.g., grace, justification, or eternal life) rather than the offer of the very person of Christ (who is himself the grace of God, our justification, and our eternal life). . . . We have emphasized the work of Christ, but too often to the exclusion of the saving person of Christ.³⁴

In Christ, we profoundly belong to God. There is no other relationship that is quite like it, which is why a host of prepositions, metaphors, and images are used to convey its reality.

Present *with* Jesus

The fourth relational dimension we see in the Scriptures is that, *in Christ*, we are present with him right now. We see one example of this in Ephesians 2:4-6, where Paul says:

But God, being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which he loved us, even when we were dead in our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ—by grace you have been saved—and *raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus*.

Paul is saying that *in Christ* Jesus' people are already, in some sense, raised and seated with him in the heavenly places. He is not talking about the future, but right now, this very minute.

³⁴ Johnson, 17-18.

So, in what sense are Jesus' people with him? How can Jesus' people be both *here* and *there* at the same time? The answer is that, spiritually-speaking, we are so united to Jesus that we are present with him, "seated with him in the heavenly places." We are present with the one who is at the right hand of God the Father (Eph. 1:20). This means that our union not only deals with *who we are* (identity) in relation to God, but with *where we are* (location) in relation to God—namely, *with* him.

Central to this imagery is *access* to God. In other words, because we are present with God *in Christ* we now have unmediated *access* to the one who is "far above all rule and authority and power and dominion, and above every name that is named, not only in this age but also in the one to come" (Eph. 1:21). Paul makes this clear when he adds that, "through him we both have *access* to the Father by one Spirit" (Eph. 2:28). This means that, *in Christ*, we are in a position of tremendous privilege, honor, and dignity. Even more, "because our lives are hidden with Christ in the very presence of God . . . we are utterly safe in Him."³⁵ The personal access to the presence of God that God's people have, *in Christ*, is profound. *In Christ*, we live our whole lives in the presence *of* God with unrestricted access *to* God.

Indwelt *by* Jesus

The fifth relational dimension is that, *in Christ*, we are indwelt by Christ. Not only are we *in Christ*, as we've seen, but Christ is in us. This means that Jesus doesn't have a vague, distant, indifferent relationship with his people. He becomes one with his people, by indwelling his people. As previously mentioned, the chapter that deals with this particular

³⁵ Steve Timmis and Christopher De La Hoyde. *In Christ: In Him Together for the World* (Fearn, Scotland: Christian Focus Publications, 2014), 30.

reality most extensively is Romans 8. Mascaskill rightly refers to this chapter as, “one of the great participatory passages in the NT.”³⁶ In it, Paul says:

Anyone who does not have the Spirit of Christ does not belong to him. But if Christ is in you, although the body is dead because of sin, the Spirit is life because of righteousness. If the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, he who raised Christ Jesus from the dead will also give life to your mortal bodies through his Spirit who dwells in you.

In other words, being indwelt by the Spirit of Christ is what it means to be a Christian as, “Anyone who does have the Spirit of Christ does not belong to him.” Notice how emphatic Paul is on this point of indwelling, “Christ is in you” (v. 10), “the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you” (v. 11), and “his Spirit who dwells in you” (v. 11). Being indwelt by the Spirit is not a superficial, nor tertiary, reality. The indwelling of Jesus, by the Spirit, is central to what it means to be a Christian. God so desires to be with his people that, *in Christ*, he indwells them.

Note how Paul refers to the Spirit as the “Spirit of Christ” (v. 9). The Spirit is not a replacement for Jesus’ presence, but the actual presence of Jesus within, by the Spirit. This is not to conflate the person of Jesus with the person of the Spirit, but to demonstrate how closely aligned their work is even amidst their Trinitarian distinctiveness. Every genuine follower of Jesus is indwelt by Jesus, by the Spirit. Jesus is not only *with* us, he is *in* us. We are not only *in him*, he is *in us*. This is a profoundly personal relational reality. God is not a distant deity, but a personal God who indwells his people, *in Christ*.

³⁶ Macaskill, 301.

A Personal/Corporate Union

The sixth relational dimension is that our union with Christ is both individual and corporate. We saw this reality clearly displayed in the metaphors for union considered above. Yet, the danger is to emphasize one at the expense of the other. It is very common in our current cultural moment to think of union with Christ in a purely personal way. If we do, we diminish it. The me-and-Jesus approach to relating to God, at the expense of the corporate, is one of the leading errors of contemporary evangelicalism. God's great purpose in the world is to call out a people for his own glory from all tribes, tongues, and nations.³⁷ That is irrefutably a corporate endeavor. Yet, at the very same time, we must take care in our desire to faithfully express the glorious corporate nature of God's redemptive purposes that we don't neglect the personal. These realities must be held in tension.

If we emphasize the corporate nature of our union, to the neglect of its individual nature, we risk losing sight of the beautiful truth that Jesus knows and loves us personally. Jesus' Church isn't just one great redeemed sea of humanity. He knows his people by name (John 10:3). He knit us together in our mother's womb (Ps. 139:13). Our days and names are written in his book (Ps. 139:16). He knows the number of hairs on our head (Luke 12:7). He catches our tears in his bottle (Ps. 56:8). Our union with Christ is intensely personal.

Yet, at the very same time, our union is also incredibly corporate. We are saved, *in Christ*, to be a people for God. If we so emphasize the individual nature of our union, to the neglect of its corporate nature, we risk losing sight of the stunning truth that Jesus is redeeming a people across millennia, and continents, for his glory. Together, Jesus' people

³⁷ For more on this see chapter 3 herein, *A Biblical Theology of Union*.

are his Church, his bride (Eph. 5:31-32; Rev. 19:6-9; 21:2). This is why Paul not only refers to individuals being *in Christ*, but entire churches (Gal. 1:22; 1 Thess. 2:14). This has implications for how we view the local church, relate to other Christians, and understand ourselves in light of God's larger redemptive story. In a word, we are united to Christ individually, to belong corporately.

A Present/Future Union

The seventh relational dimension is that union with Christ is both present and future. The relationship that God forges with his people, *in Christ*, begins really and truly *now*. This relationship is not merely a future reality. *In Christ*, we are forgiven, justified, and adopted *now*. *In Christ*, we are loved, given grace, and indwelt by the Spirit *now*. We are seated with Christ *now*. Of course, our present *experience* of these realities, true though they are, is limited. The ravages of sin within us, and around us, limit our experience while "we wait eagerly for adoption as sons" (Rom. 8:23). Nonetheless, even though we only experience them in part, these relational realities are true *now*.

Yet, our union with Christ is not merely present but also, more fully, future. The full consummation of this profound and personal relationship will take place when we die or Jesus returns. In that day, we will be perfectly "conformed to the image of his Son" (Rom. 8:29). Or, as John puts it, "when he appears, we shall be like him" (1 John 3:2). On that day, we will experience the comprehensive fullness of our union with Christ amidst an "eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison" (2 Cor. 4:17). In fact, "no eye has seen, nor ear heard, nor the heart of man imagined, what God has prepared for those who love him"

(1 Cor. 2:10). God will dwell with his people and “they will be his people, and God himself will be their God” (Rev. 21:3). Our present union guarantees that perfected future union.

Summary

In this section we considered seven overlapping, relational dimensions of union with Christ. *In Christ*, we are represented by him, which changes our very identity. *In Christ*, we are found in him, which changes the interpretive center of our life. *In Christ*, we belong to him in the most personal, intimate, and loving union in the universe. *In Christ*, are present with him, therefore extended the privilege and honor of unmediated access to God. *In Christ*, we are indwelt by the Spirit, with his personal presence within us. Figure 3 and Table 2 offer suggestions for how these dimensions interrelate. These realities are both personal and corporate, present and future. This relationship is staggering in its comprehensiveness and depth. These are not separate, isolated redemptive truths, but belong to the comprehensive whole of what it means to be new creations *in Christ*. Together, they paint a picture of an utterly unique, dynamic, multidimensional, profound relational belonging that God forges with his people *in Christ*; we in him and he in us.

Systematic Theology Summary

The purpose of this section was to conduct a brief systematic study of union with Christ from the NT. We began by surveying five of the most prominent prepositional usages that relate to our union with Christ. We discovered that even prepositional usage reveals something about the personal and profound nature of the relationship between God and his people. Then, we considered seven metaphors for how God and his people relate, *in Christ*. Taken together, these metaphors describe a relationship between God and his people, *in Christ*, that is utterly unique, personal yet corporate, dynamic, participational, with Jesus as the vital animating force. From there, we concluded our study by examining seven overlapping, interrelated, relational dimensions of the relationship that God offers in Christ. These are not separate redemptive elements, but belong together as part of the comprehensive whole of what it means to be *in Christ*. When we consider all of these elements together the result is utterly unique, personal and profound relationship with God *in Christ*.

Fig. 3. Relational Dimensions of Union with Christ

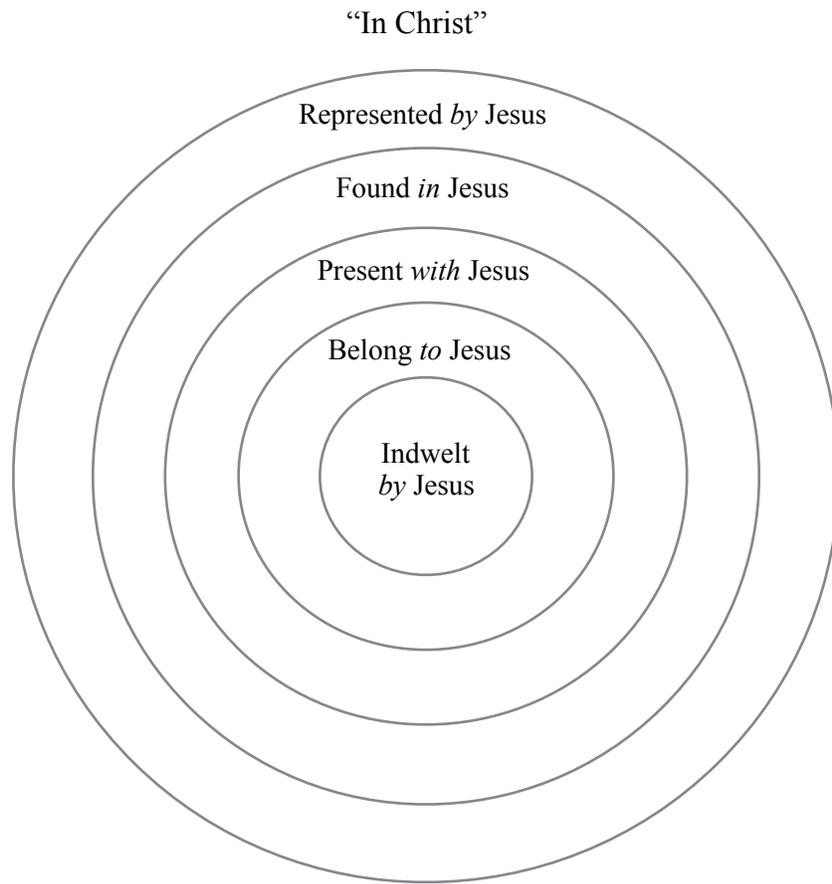


Table 2. Relational Results of God’s Redemptive Work *in Christ*

Dimension	Redemptive Work	Relational Result	“New Creation”
Represented <i>by</i> Jesus	Covenantal representation	Jesus defines us	New identity from God, in Christ (forensic/legal)
Found <i>in</i> Jesus	Personal identification	Jesus identifies with us	
Present <i>with</i> Jesus	Familial access	Jesus is for us	New access to God, in Christ (familial/vital)
Belong <i>to</i> Jesus	Oneness	Jesus is one with us	New relational bond with God, in Christ (familial/vital)
Indwelt <i>by</i> Jesus	Indwelling	Jesus is within us	New presence of God, in Christ (familial/vital)

CHAPTER 3

A BIBLICAL THEOLOGY OF UNION

Not only is union with Christ in the Bible . . . it's also the best lens with which to read the whole Bible. . . . The Bible is the grand story of God restoring our communion with him.

—Rankin Wilbourne, *Union with Christ*

Biblical Theology Introduction

We will continue our study of the nature of the relationship between God and his redeemed people, *in Christ*, by developing a biblical theology of union. In other words, we will look at how the theme of union with Christ (i.e. the nature of God's relationship with his people) develops across the redemptive narrative of Scripture. First, I will demonstrate the primacy of God's desire, from beginning to end, to be in a personal and profound relationship with a people whom he redeems from all tribes, nations, and languages. We will trace this story through the creation-fall-redemption-consummation paradigm. Second, we will consider where we see union foreshadowed, in its varied parts, in the OT. This will continue to build the biblical case that union with Christ is vital to the flourishing of Jesus' people.

The Primacy of God's Desire for a People

Let's begin by considering the primacy of God's pursuit of his people. As we will see, this is the mega-theme of the Bible upon which all other themes rest. God's purposes in history are not a collection of loosely affiliated theological truths, nor a smorgasbord of

quasi-related divine intentions. God is forging a unique relationship with his people, *in Christ*, for his glory. Everything in the Bible emanates from that center.

Creation

In Genesis 1-2 God creates the world and everything in it. The pinnacle of his creative work was the creation of mankind, whom he made in his image: “God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them” (Gen. 1:27). God then gives his newly created image bearers a mandate to, “Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and subdue it, and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over every living thing that moves on the earth” (Gen. 1:28). This is an injunction to have children, steward the earth, and, by inference, create a God-glorifying culture. Then, “God saw everything that he had made, and behold, it was very good” (Gen. 1:31). Therefore, the first two chapters of Genesis describe the “very good” reality of God, with God’s people, in God’s perfect place.

It is important to highlight that we do not see a deistic God at work in Genesis 1-2. His creative work, particularly of his people, is intensely personal. By his hands, they were formed (2:21-22). By his breath, they came to life (2:7). In his image, they alone were created to represent him within the entire created order (1:26). By his blessing and mandate, they were given unique meaning and purpose (1:28; 2:15). He walks among them “in the garden in the cool of the day” (3:8). He provides for them food (1:29), a place to live (2:8), work (2:15), while being attentive to their needs (2:18), and creates marriage (2:21-25). He speaks with them directly (1:28-30; 2:16-17). In other words, what we see from the very

beginning, is God forging an utterly unique, personal and profound, relationship with a people of his own possession.

Fall

Yet, the nature of this relationship radically changes in Genesis 3. Adam and Eve chose to disobey God, believe the lies of the serpent, and eat of the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil (3:1-6). Through this act of rebellion, sin entered the human race, and death through sin. Sin broke the unique relationship that God had forged with his people. So, God cursed the snake, the woman, and the man (3:14-19). Worst of all, God sent Adam and Eve out of the garden, away from his personal presence, “lest [Adam] reach out his hand and take also of the tree of life and eat, and live forever” (3:22). This is an important detail. If Adam and Eve remained in the garden, eating from the tree of life, they would live forever relationally separated from God. Therefore, he sent them away from their once-perfect-home. From this point forward, the rest of the Bible displays God’s desire to make right what went wrong in Eden. He would, once again, forge a unique, personal and profound relationship with a people of his own possession.

Redemption

God breaks into the bleak story described in Genesis 4-11 with an incredible promise to a pagan man named Abram:

The LORD said to Abram, “Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you. And I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and him who dishonors you I will curse, and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed (Gen. 12:1-3).

This is a beautiful, relational, and far-reaching promise. First, notice that the essence of this promise is God's desire to make a great nation, or a new people, from Abram. Not only that but, secondly, God promises to deeply identify with this people. *He* will form this people. *He* will give this people land. *He* will bless those who bless them and dishonor those who dishonor them. These are deeply relational promises of blessing, protection, and provision. Third, through this God-created people all families of the earth will be blessed. Later God adds to his promise:

I will establish by covenant between me and you and your offspring after you throughout their generations for an everlasting covenant, *to be God to you and to your offspring after you. . . . I will be their God* (Gen. 17:6).

God promises to Abraham that he will make an everlasting covenant with him and those who come after him. Notice that the essence of this promised everlasting covenant is *relational*: God will be their God and they will be his people. The rest of the Bible is the outworking of these deep relational promises of God to Abraham.

Centuries later, God continued this relational refrain to Moses, "I will take you to be *my people*, and I will be *your God*, and you shall know that I am the Lord *your God*" (Exod. 6:7). Again we see God's purpose in the unfolding drama of redemption to form a people, *his* people. After rescuing Israel from slavery in Egypt, he tells them on Sinai, "You shall be *my treasured possession* among all peoples" (Exod. 19:5; cf. Deut. 7:6-8). In other words, among all the peoples of the earth, God formed a people to be uniquely, personally, and profoundly his.

God not only aimed to create a people, but dwell among them, “I will *dwell among* the people of Israel and will be *their God*” (Exod. 29:45). From the beginning it was God’s desire to be personally present with his people. In Leviticus, God adds, “I will walk among you and will be *your God*, and you shall be *my people*” (Lev. 26:12). The phrase “walk among” should direct our thoughts back to Eden where God walked among “the garden in the cool of the day” (Gen. 3:8). In a word, God was creating a people of his own among whom he would dwell.

In time, the Lord revealed to Solomon that, “I will dwell among the children of Israel and will not forsake my people” (1 Kings 6:13). God again promises to be personally present with, and to never give up on, his people. Through the prophet Isaiah God says that he formed his people, “for [himself], that they might declare my praise” (Isa. 43:21). Through the prophet Jeremiah God says, “I will be *your God*, and you shall be *my people*” (Jer. 7:23; cf. 11:4; 30:22). Later he adds, “I will give them a heart to know that I am the Lord, and they shall be *my people* and I will be *their God*” (Jer. 24:7). Through the prophet Ezekiel, God says, “You shall be *my people*, and I will be *your God*” (Ezek. 36:28). Through the prophet Joel, God says, “I am the Lord *your God* and there is none else. And *my people* shall never again be put to shame.” (Joel 2:26) Through the prophet Zechariah, God says, “They shall be *my people*, and I will be *their God*” (Zech 8:8). Significantly, God reveals to Jeremiah that the very heart of the new covenant is the profound relational reality that, “I will be *their God*, and they shall be *my people* . . . they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest” (Jer. 31:33-34). In other words, God desires is to forge an utterly unique, personal, and profound relationship with a people as his own treasured possession. However, the issue

preventing this type of relationship becoming a reality was sin. How would God once-and-for-all deal with the sin of his people?

Zechariah prophesied that his son John would, “go before the Lord to prepare his ways, to give knowledge of salvation to his people in the *forgiveness of their sins*, because of the tender mercy of our God” (Luke 1:76). Similarly an angel revealed to Joseph, “[Mary] will bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus, for he will *save his people from their sins*” (Matt. 1:21). From the very beginning, Jesus’ work is summed up as saving God’s people through the forgiveness of sin. The great redemptive work of Jesus’ life, death, and resurrection is fundamentally relational. He came to rescue “[his] people dwelling darkness” (Matt. 4:16). He came to “give his life as a ransom for many” (Matt. 20:28). He came to offer access to the kingdom of God (Matt. 21:31). Ultimately, he died on the cross to achieve the new covenant (Luke 22:20), the very center of which was God’s desire to be in a personal and profound relationship with his people.

The Apostles too saw God’s desire for a unique relationship with his people, in Jesus, as central to his redemptive purposes in history. Quoting Hosea, Paul explains that Jesus fulfilled the promise of God that:

Those who were not my people I will call “*my people*,” and her who was not beloved I will call “beloved.” And in the very place where it was said to them, “You are not my people,” there they will be called “*sons of the living God*” (Rom. 9:25-26; cf. Hosea 2:23; 1:10).

Similarly, Paul argues that God’s promise that was originally spoken in Leviticus, “I will be their God, and they shall be my people” (2 Cor. 6:16; cf. Lev. 26:12) is fulfilled in Jesus.

Further the author of Hebrews, quoting Jeremiah 31:33, says the same, “I will be their God

and they shall be my people” (Heb. 8:10). Peter also states that Jesus came in fulfillment of God’s purposes and promises to make a people for “his own possession” (1 Pet. 2:9-10).

In other words, from the very beginning we see God promising, foreshadowing, and accomplishing an utterly unique, personal and profound, relationship with a people of his own possession, in Jesus. As Billings notes, “The final end and goal for humanity is a re-union of humanity with God in the second Adam, a union even higher than the first.”¹

Consummation

This great redemptive theme culminates in the book of Revelation. In the song of the twenty-four elders and four living creatures, they acknowledge that Jesus has “ransomed people for God from every tribe and language and nation...[making] them a kingdom and priests to our God” (Rev. 5:9,10). God’s promise to bless all the families of the earth through Abraham is fulfilled here for, in Jesus, “[God] ransomed people for God from every tribe and language and people and nation” (cf. Rev. 7:9-10). In other words, God’s fundamental eternal purpose is profoundly relational. Then, the entire Bible ends with:

Behold, the dwelling place of God is with man. He will dwell with them, and they will be his people, and God himself will be with them as their God. . . . They will see his face, and his name will be on their foreheads. And night will be no more. They will need no light of lamp or sun, for the Lord God will be their light, and they will reign forever and ever. (Rev. 21:3-4; 22:4-5)

In other words, the Bible ends where it begins: God, with God’s people, in God’s place. From beginning to end, God is forging an utterly unique, personal and profound relationship with a people of his own possession, *in Christ*. In this way, “The church does not await the return of

¹ J. Todd Billings, *Union with Christ: Reframing Theology and Ministry for the Church* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Academic, 2011), 65.

Christ so that we may be united to him; rather, the church eagerly awaits the consummation of this union.”²

The Developing Nature of God’s Relationship with His People

Now we will consider how God’s relationship with his people develops across the redemptive narrative. We already saw that the NT portrays union with Christ as a multidimensional relational reality. The nature of our union with Christ is staggering in its comprehensiveness and depth, for *in Christ*:

- (1) we are represented *by* him, given a new identity
- (2) we are found *in* him, identified with his saving work
- (3) we belong *to* him, profoundly united to him,
- (4) we are present *with* him, given unmediated access, and
- (5) we are indwelt *by* him, with his personal presence within.³

These are not separate, isolated redemptive truths, but belong to the comprehensive whole of what it means to be *in Christ*. If these realities describe what it means to be *in Christ*, then we should expect to see these same realities, albeit in seed form, in the OT. That is precisely the case. The OT foreshadows God’s personal and profound commitment to his covenant people that climaxes in union with Christ in the NT.⁴ We will consider each of these dimensions in turn.

² Marcus Peter Johnson, *One with Christ: An Evangelical Theology of Salvation* (Wheaton, Illinois: Crossway, 2013), 40.

³ This section will not specifically address (6) A personal/corporate union and (7) A present/future union as these relational dimensions are common to God’s relationship with his people throughout the history of redemption.

⁴ Robert A. Peterson, Robert, *Salvation Applied by the Spirit: Union with Christ* (Wheaton, Illinois: Crossway, 2015), 20.

Represented by

First we will consider the development of Jesus' representation of his people. As we've seen, this representation is comprehensive and deep, not superficial, offering his people an entirely new identity.⁵ Are there foreshadowings of God representing his people in this way in the OT? Yes. God does this covenantally. A covenant is a relational agreement that outlines how God promises to *relate* to others. Every covenant has a covenantal head (e.g. Adamic, Noahic, Abrahamic, Mosaic, Davidic, New). The covenantal head represented everyone within the covenant. Yet, that is not all. Not only do we see covenantal representation throughout the redemptive narrative, we also see a simultaneous relational progression, or deepening, that reaches its climax in the new covenant under Jesus' headship.

The first step in God's unfolding desire to have a people of his own is found in the Adamic covenant that set up the general relational nature of how God would relate to mankind. God's took another relational step forward in his selection of Abram, years later, whom he promised to make into a "great nation" and through whom "all the families of the earth shall be blessed" (Gen. 12:2,3). God took another relational step forward by sending Moses to rescue his people (Exod. 3:6,7). God took another relational step forward in his desire to have a people of his own, by promising David that he will establish one of David's sons as king over his people forever (2 Sam. 7:11-16). This was a significant for it revealed that, first, God would reign over his people through a mediatorial king and, second, God desired an eternal (not temporal) people. This left God's people awaiting a forever-king in the line of David who would gather God's people from the ends of the earth. Ultimately, all of

⁵ For more see Figure 2.

God's purposes to create a people of his own climaxed in Jesus' inauguration of the new covenant. See Table 3 for a description of the major biblical covenants, their parts, and the relational progression seen throughout.

Table 3. Major Biblical Covenants and their Parts

Covenant	Head	Type	Blessing	Curse	Sign	<i>Relational Progression</i>	Text
<i>Adamic</i>	Adam	Works	Eternal life	Death	Tree of Life	Relational groundwork for God and mankind	Gen. 2:15-17
<i>Noahic</i>	Noah	Grace	Judgment postponed	None	Rainbow	Re-issuing of cultural mandate following flood, new start	Gen. 9:8-17
<i>Abrahamic</i>	Abraham	Grace	People, place, blessing to world	None	Circumcision	Specific promise to create a people of His own as blessing to world, thru Abraham	Gen. 15, 17
<i>Mosaic</i>	Moses	Grace & Works	Possession of land	Exile	Sabbath	Formalization of Israel as God's special people, following rescue	Exod. 20ff
<i>Davidic</i>	David	Grace	Eternal kingdom	None	A son	Promise of a king who will reign over God's people forever	2 Sam. 7
<i>New</i>	Jesus	Grace	Forgiveness, eternal life with God	None	Baptism	Jesus is the culmination of God's purposes to create a people of who belong to him, to whom he is profoundly united	Jer. 31:27-34; Matt. 28:27-30

Found *in*

Next we will examine the development of the reality that we are *found in*, or deeply identified with, Jesus. *In Christ*, we are *found in* Jesus' life, death, and resurrection. Our life is hidden in him (Col. 3:3). Where do we see foreshadowings of the great union reality of being found in Jesus in the OT? We see this reality foreshadowed most clearly in the sacrificial system instituted at Sinai.

After God delivered his people from bondage to slavery in Egypt he gave them his Law. The Law was designed to display his holiness and make the consciences of his people aware of their guilt and, therefore, their need for a savior. How would God simultaneously uphold his holiness and his loving mercy? By providing a substitutionary sacrifice. The sinner placed his hands on the animal's head which symbolized their personal identification with the animal and, thereby, the transfer of their guilt to it. The animal would then be put to death in place of the sinner, as their substitutionary sacrifice. Watching the sacrifice die, reminded them of what they deserved if the sacrifice had not intervened. In a real way, they were *found in* the sacrifice. The achievements of the sacrifice were counted as their own. The sacrificial system put being *found in* a substitutionary death at the heart of atonement for sin and reconciliation with God.

But, there were weaknesses in the sacrificial system. For example, the system required the endless repetition of sacrifices for the ongoing sins of God's people. Second, while the system could deal with the guilt of sin, it could not change the heart from which the sin came. Third, the priests themselves were fellow sinners in need of atonement for their own sin. The result was a repetitive sacrificial system, mediated by sinners, that dealt with

the sin of God's people without effecting heart-level change. This pointed to the need for a perfect sacrifice that would deal with the sins of God's people once and for all.

This theme of being *found in* reaches its climax in Jesus. Jesus came, "once and for all at the end of the ages to put away sin by the sacrifice of himself" (Heb. 9:26). Why? Because "it is impossible for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sins" (Heb. 10:4). Jesus came as the ultimate fulfillment of the sacrificial system. Therefore, there is no more need for ongoing sacrifices for sin because, "he did this once for all when he offered up himself" (Heb. 7:27). As such, he is the "mediator of [the] new covenant" (Heb. 9:15) and "has entered, not into the holy places made with hands, which are copies of the true things, but into heaven itself, now to appear in the presence of God on our behalf" (Heb. 9:24). Therefore, his life is counted as our life. His death is counted as our death. His resurrection is counted as our resurrection. His victory is counted as our victory. Why? Because we are *found in*, or personally identified with, Christ.

Belong to

Next we will briefly consider the development of the theme of belonging to God. The oneness, or deep belonging, with which the NT reveals that we have with God, *in Christ*, is profound. We belong, in the most comprehensive sense possible, to God. Where do we see foreshadowings of this type of belonging in the OT? We see evidences of this everywhere. In Exodus 6:7, God says, "I will take you to be *my people*, and *I will be your God*." Or through Jeremiah, God says, "*I will be your God*, and you shall be *my people*" (Jer. 7:23) and again "So shall you be *my people*, and *I will be your God*" (Jer. 11:4) and again "You shall be *my*

people, and I will be *your God*” (Jer. 30:22). Through the prophet Ezekiel, God again says, “You shall be *my people*, and *I will be your God*” (Ezek. 36:28). Samuel reminds God’s people, “it has pleased the Lord to make you *a people for himself*” (1 Sam. 12:22).

Throughout the OT God refers to his people as his “treasured possession.”⁶ There are thirty eight references to “my people Israel” and hundreds more to “my people.” In other words, relationally belonging to God is a very significant theme in the OT.

Yet, the level of belonging between God and his people not only continues in the NT, it intensifies. Not only is God with his people, he indwells his people, *in Christ*. Not only does God deal with our external behavior, he gives us new hearts, *in Christ*. No one can take God’s people out of his hand, *in Christ* (John 10:28). Nothing in the entire created order can separate God’s people from the love of God, *in Christ* (Rom. 8:38). He never turns anyone away who comes to him (John 6:37). God will always provide for his people, *in Christ* (Matt. 6:33). God will work all things together for the good for his people, *in Christ* (Rom. 8:28). God will complete the good work he has already begun in his people, *in Christ* (Phil. 1:6). God’s people are being actively kept by his power, *in Christ* (1 Pet. 1:5). God has given his people all things that “pertain to life and godliness, *in Christ*” (2 Pet. 1:3). Even more, when the entire drama of redemption comes to its conclusion we read, “they will be his people, and God himself will be with them as their God” (Rev. 21:3). The level of belonging that exists between God and his people begins in seed form in the OT yet reaches its climactic fulfillment, *in Christ*.

⁶ Exod. 19:5; Deut. 7:6; 14:2; 26:18; Mal. 3:17.

Present *with*

Next we will look at the development of the type of presence, or access, that God's people have to him. The personal access to the presence of God that God's people have, *in Christ*, is profound. Where do we see foreshadowings of this type of access to the personal presence of God in the OT? There are a number of ways to highlight this reality unfolding in the OT, but we will focus on one. We already discussed the perfected presence experienced between God and Adam and Eve in the garden and how that was broken by sin, most clearly seen in their removal from Eden. Because of the Fall they lost their access to the personal presence of God. From that point we only see brief appearances of God to particular people, at particular times, in particular places.

Yet, this changes with the institution of the ceremonial code and the priesthood around the tabernacle and, later, the temple. The vestments of the high priests were elaborate and highly symbolic. One important element of these vestments was the breastplate which contained twelve stones that represented the twelve tribes of Israel (Exod. 28:10; 39:14). Every year, on the Day of Atonement, the high priest appeared before God to make atonement for himself and God's people (Lev. 16:6). In this way, all the tribes of Israel were "present" before God. However, it was only safe to be in God's presence (1) once a year, (2) under strict ceremonial guidelines, and (3) through the representation of another. It wasn't possible to be in, nor have access to, God's presence unless these guidelines were met. Would God's people ever have real, unconditional, unmediated access to God's presence again?

As with the others, this theme reaches its climax in the NT. In light of Jesus' life, death, and resurrection, "through him [Jew and Gentile] have *access* in one Spirit to the

Father” (Eph. 2:18). There are three astonishing features of this verse. First, *in Christ*, we have *direct* access to the Father. This is the fuller reality foreshadowed in the OT. Second, *in Christ*, this access to God is available to Jew and Gentile alike (i.e. all people, everywhere). Thirdly, *in Christ*, this access is permanent, not time bound. For this reason, Paul says that in Jesus “we have boldness and *access* with confidence through our faith in him” (Eph. 3:12).

Indwelt *by*

Lastly, the most mysterious aspect of our union with Christ is that he is personally present *within* us. God so deeply identifies with his people that, *in Christ*, he personally indwells them; we are in him, he is in us. Where do we see foreshadowings of God intending to dwell in his people in the OT? To answer this we will make a distinction between God’s ordinary presence and his special presence. God’s ordinary presence refers to his promises to be with his people. For example, God promised Isaac, “I will be with you and will bless you” (Gen. 26:3). God promised Jacob, “I will be with you” (Gen. 31:3). When God sent Moses to Pharaoh he promised, “I will be with you” (Exod. 3:12). While this is a beautiful truth, this is not the presence I have in mind here.

The special presence of God is marked by his intentional dwelling among his people. During the exodus we’re told, “the pillar of cloud by day and the pillar of fire by night did not depart from before the people” (Exod. 13:22). In other words, God dwelt with his people. This special presence continued with the tent of meeting where, “the Lord would speak with Moses face to face, as a man speaks to his friend” (Exod. 33:11). This special presence moved to the tabernacle when, “the glory of the Lord filled the tabernacle” (Exod. 40:35).

The focal point of this special presence was on the mercy seat of the ark of the covenant (Exod. 25:22; Num. 7:89). Access to this special presence of God was strictly limited to once a year by the high priest, though exceptions seemed to have been made for Moses. If these restrictions were violated, the offender would be killed (Lev. 16:2,13).

This special presence of God went with them all their days, in various forms, up to the building of the temple by Solomon. God promised Solomon, “*I will dwell among the children of Israel and will not forsake my people Israel*” (1 Kings 6:13). When the ark of the covenant, which represented God’s special presence among his people, was brought into the temple, “the glory of the Lord filled the house of the Lord” (1 Kings 8:11). God’s special presence with his people was one of the primary defining features of OT Jewish life.

However, there were limitations. The temple was the center of Judaism. Only the high priest could approach the presence of God and, even then, once a year. Gentiles were not allowed anywhere near God’s presence, though there was a portion of the temple designated for them. So, God was close but still at a distance. There was access, but it was limited. This made Jeremiah’s words of the new covenant particularly intriguing, “I will put my law *within* them, and I will write it on *their hearts*” (Jer. 31:33). Adding further intrigue were the words of the prophet Joel, “it shall come to pass . . . that I will pour out my Spirit [pointing to God’s special presence] on all flesh” (Joel 2:28). Through these prophecies, and others, God was pointing to a greater, more intimate indwelling of God within the hearts of his people.

This is the reality that came to fruition through the life and work of Jesus. In the Gospel of John, Jesus said:

It is to your advantage that I go away, for if I do not go away, the Helper [the Holy Spirit] will not come to you. But if I go, I will send him (John 16:7).

Elsewhere, Jesus says, “I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Helper, to be with you forever, even the Spirit of truth” (John 14:16). This is precisely what Jesus did following his ascension at Pentecost (Acts 2:1-4). Now, all who believe in him, Jew and Gentile alike, receive the indwelling presence of God, by the Spirit. Just as the special presence of God was the defining feature of the Jewish people, the special presence of God, by his Spirit, is the defining feature of his new covenant people.

Biblical Theology Summary

The purpose of this section was to conduct a brief biblical theology of the development of themes associated with union with Christ. We began by demonstrating the primacy of God’s desire, from beginning to end, to be in a personal and profound relationship with his redeemed people from all tribes, nations, and languages. Then, we considered how union with Christ is foreshadowed, in its varied parts, in the OT. The themes of *representation*, being *found in*, *present with*, *belonging to*, and *indwelt by* progressively develop across the redemptive storyline and find their ultimate fulfillment in the unique, dynamic, multidimensional, profound relational belonging forged between God and his people, *in Christ*; we in him and he in us.

CHAPTER 4

A HISTORY OF UNION

[*Union with Christ*] is the cause of all other graces that we are made partakers of; they are all communicated unto us by virtue of our *union with Christ*. Hence is our adoption, our justification, our sanctification, our fruitfulness, our perseverance, our resurrection, our glory.

—John Owen, *An Exposition of the Epistle to the Hebrews*

Historical Theology Introduction

Our purpose in this section is to highlight the central role given to the doctrine of union with Christ throughout the history of the church. This section will continue to build the biblical case that union with Christ is vital to the flourishing of Jesus' people. We will conduct this historical survey by briefly summarizing the prevailing view of union with Christ during four general periods of church history: the patristic period (A.D. 100-451), the middle-ages and renaissance (A.D. 500-1500), the reformation and post-reformation (A.D. 1500-1750), and the modern era (A.D. 1750-Present). We will do this by briefly examining a number of leading theologians during these periods. While these, of course, are not the only views, they are a representative sampling of the prevailing views of their given era.

The Patristic Period (A.D. 100-451)

The patristic era is viewed as the period between the closing of the NT canon and the Council of Chalcedon (451). This period is most known for important debates related to the extent of the canon, the nature of Christ, and doctrine of the Trinity. Yet, this period is also

marked by a strong emphasis on the believers union with God, *in Christ*. We will look at three leading theologians of this period: Irenaeus of Lyons (130-200), Athanasius of Alexandria (296-373), and Augustine of Hippo (354-430). What is particularly fascinating about how these men speak of union with Christ is that it is largely *assumed*. In other words, the context of their quotations below is not the explicit defense of union. Rather, union with Christ is seen as what it means to be a Christian.

Irenaeus of Lyons (130-200)

Irenaeus became the bishop of Lyons around 178, where he remained until his death. He is primarily known for his defense of Christianity against Gnosticism. This gave rise to his most important work, *Against All Heresies*, within which he says:

The Word of God was made man, and he who was the Son of God became the Son of Man, that man, having been *taken into* the Word, and receiving adoption, might become the son of God. For by no means could we have attained to incorruptibility and immortality, unless we had been *united to* incorruptibility and immortality.¹

Irenaeus is clearly using the terms “taken into” and “united” to refer to the nature of our relationship with God, *in Christ*. Namely, that this relationship involves a vital union.

Athanasius of Alexandria (296-373)

One hundred years later, Athanasius found himself embroiled in the heresy of Arianism. He became most known for his important Christological work, *On the Incarnation*.

¹ Quoted in Donald Fairbairn, *Life in the Trinity: An Introduction to Theology with the Help of the Church Fathers* (Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity, 2009), 33. Emphasis added.

Within he wrote, “[Jesus] became man that *we might become divine*.”² This sentence has long been debated. Admittedly, it does leave room for misunderstanding. Was he saying that we become the same substance of God, thus losing the Creator-created distinction? No. This was Athanasius’ way of highlighting what the Apostle Peter said about us becoming “partakers of the divine nature” (2 Pet. 1:4) Notice how Athanasius, in this admittedly small sampling, directly connects the *reason* for Jesus becoming man to the end of making us like God. In other words, in his mind, the fundamental rationale for God becoming man was so that we might be in union with him.

Augustine of Hippo (354-430)

Aurelius Augustine is considered by many to be the most influential theologian in the history of the Christian church. He became the bishop of Hippo (modern day Algeria) in 395 and is most known for his contribution on the sacraments, the role of grace in salvation, and the Trinity. Given the breadth of Augustine’s work it would be difficult to assign a theological center. However, it is not an overstatement to say that union with Christ was a controlling concept in his understanding of what it means to be a Christian. For example in *The Trinity*, he says:

For surely if the Son of God by nature became son of man by mercy for the sake of men (that is the meaning of the Word became flesh and dwelt among us), how much easier it is to believe that *the sons of men by nature can become sons of God by grace and dwell in God*; for it is in him alone and thanks to him alone that they can be

² Athanasius, *Contra Gentes and De Incarnatione*, trans. Robert W. Thomson (Oxford: Clarendon, 1971), 134-277. Emphasis added.

happy, by sharing in his immortality; *it was to persuade us of this* that the Son of God came to share in our mortality.³

Here Augustine articulates the reasonableness of our union with Christ by pointing out that if we believe God became man, *in Christ*, why should we struggle to believe that we can now “become sons of God” and, even more, “dwell in God.” In other words, God came to dwell among us, as one of us. Now, *in Christ*, we can dwell in him, “sharing in his immortality.”⁴ Notice that Augustine goes on to state that the reason Jesus came “was to persuade us of this” reality. Again, we see how central our union with Christ was to the life and thinking of the early church fathers.

There has been a small resurgence of theologians who have taken a fresh look at the early church fathers in order to determine what they meant by terms such as: *theosis*, *deification*, and *participation*. Throughout history, many have simply dismissed the patristics on these points, accusing them of being influenced by Platonistic paradigms. However, that is being challenged today.⁵

Donald Fairbairn, in his book *Life in the Trinity*, convincingly argues that salvation was understood, from the earliest days, as being personally and profoundly united to the triune God through Christ. Therefore, the early church fathers, saw that fundamental to being a Christian was sharing in the life of God, *in Christ*.⁶ Fairbairn summarizes:

³ Saint Augustine of Hippo, *The Trinity* (Hyde Park, NY: New City, 1991), 354. Quoted in Rankin Wilbourne, *Union with Christ: The Way to Know and Enjoy God* (Colorado Springs, Colorado: David C. Cook, 2016), 99. Emphasis added.

⁴ Again, this is not to say that believers become the same substance as God, nor that the Creator-created distinction is lost. Rather it is to highlight the deep level of relational intimacy that exists between God and man, *in Christ*.

⁵ See Grant Macaskill, “Participation and Union with Christ in the Patristic Tradition and Modern Orthodox Theology,” *Union with Christ in the New Testament* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 42-76.

⁶ Fairbairn, 6-7.

The central reality of the Christian life is that believers are united to Christ, and the reason this is so central is because it links us to the central relationship that there is, Christ's relationship to his Father... The early church recognized this, and so they wrote of salvation by writing of the God in whom we participate when we are saved. They did not normally parcel out different aspects of salvation, discussing them individually as if one could possess one or another of them in isolation. Instead, whenever they wrote of salvation, the context for the discussion was a treatment of God, of Christ, and of the Holy Spirit. And whenever they did write of different aspects of salvation, they made clear that these aspects hinged on and revolved around participation in Christ.⁷

In other words, the early church saw union with Christ as what it *means* to be a Christian.

The Middle Ages and the Renaissance (A.D. 500-1500)

The most influential theologian of the middle ages was Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274).⁸ The Roman Catholic Church continues to look to him as one of their greatest theologians and philosophers. In his most famous work, *Summa Theologiae*, he systematically deals with the reality of God, the nature of Christ, and salvation. John Fesko highlights that what is often missed in studies of Aquinas is the centrality of the believers union with the triune God. He argues that “union with the triune God is one of the key themes of the Summa.”⁹ For Aquinas, “union with God is offered as the chief purpose of creation.”¹⁰ In *Summa*, Aquinas sounds a lot like Augustine when speaking of the nature of our relationship with God, *in Christ*:

⁷ Ibid., 202.

⁸ Again, while Aquinas' views are not the only views of this period, they are a representative sampling of the prevailing view of his era given his stature and influence as a leading theologian.

⁹ J. V. Fesko, *Beyond Calvin: Union with Christ and Justification in Early Modern Reformed Theology (1517-1700)*, Reformed Historical Theology, vol. 20 (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2012), 110.

¹⁰ Ibid., 110.

The full participation of the Divinity, which is the true bliss of man and end of human life . . . is bestowed upon us by Christ's humanity; for Augustine says . . . "God was made man, that man might be made God."¹¹

Aquinas, like Augustine, speaks of the nature of our relationship with God, *in Christ*, as one of participation. He became like us, as one of us, so that we might become like him, as one with Him. Yet, he is careful to express that the created-Creator distinction remains fully intact. Note how Aquinas connects this participation with "the true bliss of man and end of human life." For Aquinas, Christian salvation is union with Christ for "eternal happiness is only obtained through union with Christ."¹²

The Reformation and Post-Reformation (A.D. 1500-1750)

We now move on to the next period of church history, the Reformation and post-Reformation period, stretching from 1500-1750. Here we will briefly consider what Martin Luther, John Calvin, and the Puritans said about the doctrine of union. What we discover is a continuing emphasis on the believers union with God, *in Christ*.

Martin Luther (1483-1546)

Martin Luther (1483-1546) is most famous for sparking the Reformation and his emphasis upon justification by grace alone. Yet, what is often missed is his profound understanding of the believer's union with Christ:

But faith must be taught correctly, namely that by it you are *so cemented to Christ that He and you are as one person*, which cannot be separated but remains attached to Him forever and declares: "I am as Christ." And Christ in turn says: "I am as the

¹¹ Ibid., 110.

¹² Ibid., 112.

sinner who is attached to me and I to him. For by faith we are joined together into one flesh and bone.” Thus Eph 5:30 says: “We are members of the body of Christ, of his flesh and bones,” in such a way that faith couples Christ and me *more intimately than a husband is coupled to his wife*.¹³

Here Luther refers to the nature of our relationship with God in terms of being “cemented . . . as one person . . . more intimately than a husband is coupled to his wife.” In other words, he understood the nature of salvation as a personal and profound union with the living God, *in Christ*. In his *Lectures on Galatians*, Luther connects justification with union:

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.¹⁴

Notice again how Luther describes the nature of our relationship with God, *in Christ*, with the terms “attachment” and “cementing” of ourselves to God, by faith. It is by this unique union that “He lives in me and I in Him.” Luther too saw salvation as fundamentally and profoundly relational, *in Christ*.

John Calvin (1509-1564)

Similarly, John Calvin (1509-1564) also saw union with Christ as central to God’s salvific purposes.¹⁵ Calvin clearly saw salvation not merely as a series of theological truths, but as being brought into a personal and profound relationship with the living God, *in Christ*.

¹³ Martin Luther, *Lectures on Galatians, 1535: Chap. 1-4*, eds. Jaroslav Jan Pelikan and Helmut T. Lehmann (Saint Louis, Missouri: Concordia Publishing House, 1963), 168.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 167-168.

¹⁵ For a chronological development of Calvin’s thought see Robert Letham, *Union with Christ: In Scripture, History, and Theology* (Phillipsburg, New Jersey: Presbyterian & Reformed, 2011), 103-115.

Johnson notes that “we find the biblical theme of union with Christ running like a thread through Calvin’s writings,”¹⁶ In his *Institutes* Calvin states:

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 to us. Therefore, to *share* in what he has received from the Father, he had to become ours and *to dwell within us . . .* for, as I have said, all that he possesses is nothing to us *until we grow into one body with him.*¹⁷

Here Calvin captures the two dimensions of our union, Christ dwelling “within” and us growing “into one body with him.” Further he highlights that without this relationship we are “separated from him.” In other words, the nature of salvation is being brought into union with Christ.¹⁸ We find similar language in his commentary on 1 Corinthians where he says:

For this is the design of the gospel, that *Christ may become ours*, and that we may be *ingrafted into his body*. Now when the Father gives him to us in possession, *he also communicates himself to us in him*; and hence arises a participation in every benefit.¹⁹

What is fascinating here is that Calvin clearly sees that the “design of the gospel” is our union with Christ, that he “may become ours, and that we may be ingrafted into his body” and from this reality we receive “participation in every benefit.” It is important to recognize that Calvin is describing the essence of Christian salvation here, not some tertiary implication of the gospel. This emphasis is what led TF Torrance to say that, “All Calvin’s teaching and

¹⁶ Marcus Peter Johnson, *One with Christ: An Evangelical Theology of Salvation* (Wheaton, Illinois: Crossway, 2013), 23.

¹⁷ John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, trans. Ford Lewis Battles, ed. John T. McNeill (Philadelphia; London: Westminster Press, 1960), 3.1.1.

¹⁸ Also: “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, so that Christ, having been made ours, makes us sharers with him in the gifts with which he has been endowed. 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 ingrafted into his body—in short, *because he designs to make us one with him.*” (Calvin, *Institutes*, 3.11.10); emphasis added.

¹⁹ John Calvin, *Commentary on 1 Corinthians*, trans. Thomas Myers (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Books, 2003), 60.

preaching have to do with the salvation through union with Christ in his death and resurrection.”²⁰ Calvin saw salvation as fundamentally relational, as being personally and profoundly united to the living God, *in Christ*.

Puritans (1600-1750)

The last group we will consider, in this post-reformation era, are the Puritans. As a whole, the Puritans placed a tremendous emphasis on union with Christ. Space limitations necessitate a focused approach herein, therefore this section will consider John Owen (1616-1683), arguably among the greatest English-speaking theologians, as a representative of the prevailing views of his era. Owen saw union with Christ as “the greatest, most honorable, and glorious of all graces we are made partakers of.”²¹ In his famous work, *Communion with God*, he states that our “communion with God flows from that union which is in Christ Jesus.”²² In other words, the ongoing experiential dimension of our relationship with God (i.e. communion) is founded upon our real, vital union with God, in Christ. For Owen, union and salvation were inextricably connected, “by this personal union in Christ we are saved.”²³ Like Calvin before him, Owen understood this personal, profound living union with God, in Christ as the chief end of the gospel, for “only Christ can satisfy the soul.”²⁴

²⁰ Johnson, 23.

²¹ Joel R. Beeke and Mark Jones, *A Puritan Theology: Doctrine for Life* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Reformation Heritage, 2012), 483.

²² John Owen. *Communion with God* (Edinburgh; Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth Trust, 1991), 3.

²³ *Ibid.*, 50.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 51.

The Modern Era (A.D. 1750-Present)

With the transition to the modern era the emphasis on union with Christ and its centrality in salvation fades into the background following the decline of the Puritans. With this loss, union with Christ, for the most part is, “lost to the layperson.”²⁵ From this point, the emphasis on union tends to be more, though not solely, academic in nature. In this section, we will look at BB Warfield, Karl Barth, John Murray, and Sinclair Ferguson.

B.B. Warfield (1851-1921)

B.B. Warfield was the last of the great Princeton theologians before the split in 1929 that resulted in the formation of Westminster Theological Seminary. While perhaps most known for his defense of the inerrancy of Scripture, he also believed in the centrality of union with Christ. In one message he states that, *in Christ*, a believer is:

a new creation; with a new life in him; and should live in the power of this new and deathless life. . . . The pregnancy of the implication is extreme, but it is all involved in the one fact that if we died with Christ, if we are His and share His death on Calvary, we shall live with Him; live with Him in a redeemed life here, cast in another mould from the old life of the flesh, and live with Him hereafter for ever. This great appeal to their union and communion with Christ lays the basis for all that follows. It puts the reader on the place . . . of “in Christ Jesus.”²⁶

Warfield explains that “union and communion with Christ” serves as the basis for the Christian experience.

²⁵ Wilbourne, 107.

²⁶ B. B. Warfield, *Faith and Life: Confernces in the Oratory of Princeton Seminary* (New York: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1916), 422-423.

Karl Barth (1886-1968)

Though controversial, Barth is considered one of the most influential theologians of the 20th century. As such, it is worthwhile to consider how he addresses union with Christ. It has been noted that, “Not since the apostle Paul has one phrase [in Christ] so dominated a theologian’s work.”²⁷ Indeed, Barth understood the very essence of what it means to be a Christian as being united to Christ. In his magnum opus, *Church Dogmatics*, Barth explains:

A man becomes and is a Christian as he unites himself with Christ and Christ with him . . . this is the starting-point for everything else which is to be thought and said concerning what makes a Christian a Christian.²⁸

Barth sees union with Christ as the foundation for “everything” that “makes a Christian a Christian.” This is amazing statement and, actually, in line with the rich history of the Church’s understanding of union. Further, Barth understood union not only as the “starting point,” but the very purpose for which Christians are meant to live:

The purpose for which Christians are already called here and now in their life-histories within universal history is that in the self-giving of Jesus Christ to them, and theirs to Him, they should enter into their union with Him.²⁹

Barth underscores the reality of union while taking pains to express there is no conflation between Christ and the Christian. In this union:

Christ does not merge into the Christian nor the Christian into Christ. There is no disappearance nor destruction of the one in favor of the other.³⁰

²⁷ Wilbourne, 111.

²⁸ Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, 1st American edition, ed. Helmut Gollwitzer (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 1994), 260.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 248.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 245.

The distinctiveness of both Christ and the Christian are maintained, even as the “self-giving Christ and the Christian become and are a single totality, a fluid and differentiated but genuine and solid, unity.”³¹ Barth recognized the central importance of our union with Christ.

John Murray (1898-1975)

John Murray was an accomplished reformed theologian and helped establish the newly forming Westminster Theological Seminary. Though he wrote broadly, he is best known for *Redemption Accomplished and Applied* in which he wrote:

Nothing is more central or basic than union and communion with Christ. Union with Christ is really the central truth of the whole doctrine of salvation not only in its application but also in its once-for-all accomplishment in the finished work of Christ.³²

At this point in our study, a statement like this is not surprising. Murray sees union with Christ as the “central truth” of Christian salvation. Nothing, he claims, is more basic. Ever since Murray first published this work in 1955, this quote has become ubiquitous in theological writing on union with Christ. It continues to catch the attention of many given the stature of Murray as a theologian. It makes one wonder why union with Christ hasn’t been seen as “central” as Murray claimed it was.

Sinclair Ferguson (1948-Present)

Lastly, we will consider the modern theologian Sinclair Ferguson. He is arguably the leading proponent for bringing union with Christ back into modern Christian consciousness

³¹ Ibid., 247.

³² John Murray, *Redemption Accomplished and Applied* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 1955), 161.

at the lay level. What is particularly unique about Ferguson is that he has served as both a local church pastor and seminary professor, offering him unique insights into both. In his recent book, *The Whole Christ*, Ferguson notes that it was only “until recently an emphasis on union with Christ was tellingly absent from the evangelical subculture.”³³ This is not a minor issue, for everything offered to us by God is found *in Christ*. Ferguson posits that the primary reason the person of Jesus Christ and his benefits (justification, sanctification, reconciliation, adoption, etc) are so often separated from one another in the minds of his people is that we’ve lost sight of union with Christ - which is meant to hold them together.³⁴ “Union with Christ . . . is a structural foundation; omit it and the building collapses.”³⁵ In other words, union with Christ is central.

Historical Theology Summary

The purpose of his section was to highlight the central role of union with Christ throughout the history of the Church. We did this by briefly summarizing the prevailing views of leading theologians on union with Christ within four general periods of church history. What we discovered is that from the early church to the modern era, theologians have agreed on the centrality of union with Christ. From Irenaus to Athanasius to Augustine; from Aquinas to Luther to Calvin; from B.B. Warfield, to Barth, to Murray, to Ferguson, there has been agreement throughout the ages on the essence of Christianity being a personal and

³³ Sinclair Ferguson, *The Whole Christ: Legalism, Antinomianism, and Gospel Assurance: Why the Marrow Controversy Still Matters* (Wheaton, Illinois: Crossway, 2016), 48.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 45.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 122, note 168.

profound union with the living God, *in Christ*. With this in view, we now turn to considering how this union effects our every day lives.

CHAPTER 5

AN APPLIED THEOLOGY OF UNION

Even though our mystical union with Christ is absolutely central to faith, even though all the apostles and the greatest leaders of the church throughout history return to that union time and time again, even though Christ's nearness to us is indispensable to our own deep devotion, the temptation we all feel is to stay at the cross and Golgotha and to go no farther. *That is fatal to faith.*

—Abraham Kuyper, *Near Unto God*

Applied Theology Introduction

The remainder of this thesis will demonstrate that a biblically robust understanding of our union with Christ, which we have established heretofore, is vital to the flourishing of Jesus' people, as his disciples and his church. In our systematic theology survey we saw that the NT employs a variety of prepositions, metaphors, and interrelated relational dimensions to describe a relationship between God and his people, *in Christ*, that is personal, profound, and utterly unique. In our biblical theology survey we saw God's desire for a personal and profound relationship with his people progressively develop across the redemptive storyline and reach its climactic fulfillment in Jesus. In our historical survey we saw that union with Christ has played a central role throughout the history of the church, with many of its leading theologians viewing this vital, personal, and profound union as the very essence of Christianity. In short, to be in union with Christ is what it means to be a Christian. Therefore, how should the nature of this unique, personal and profound relationship impact our daily lives, ongoing discipleship, and local churches? Significantly. The very nature of this

relationship influences how we see God, how we view ourselves, our level of joy, how we avoid legalism and licentiousness, how we understand the local church, how we approach preaching and the sacraments, how we pray, how we battle against indwelling sin, how we see Jesus as our example, and how we persevere.¹

Union and God

A right understanding of our union with Christ should revolutionize our understanding of *who* God is and *what* he is a like. Our union with Christ reveals that God desires to forge a unique, dynamic, multidimensional, profound relational belonging with us, *in Christ*. What *kind* of God would do that?² This union reflects God's personal commitment to his people in his desire to be forge a unique and profound relational belonging; we *in* Him and He *in* us. This reveals that God is not marginally interested in his people, but inextricably bound to them, and personally invested in our welfare.

This union also reflects God's steadfast love in establishing an unbreakable bond with his sinful, yet redeemed, people. This union also reflects God's incomparable patience as he personally indwells those who are still being perfected, even while remaining wholly other. This union also reflects God's humble grace in adopting us as his children. This unions also reveals that God is not impersonal, aloof, disinterested, distracted, busy, ambivalent, nor abstract, but deeply personal, actively committed, readily available, and always near. Further, this union reveals that his purposes aren't random, self-serving, half-hearted, capricious,

¹ Of course, this is merely a representative sampling of potential topics to be discussed. Others could include: discipleship, evangelism, suffering, marriage and divorce, justification, community, dating non-Christians, etc.

² For an extended treatment see J. Todd Billings, "Salvation as Adoption in Christ: An Antidote to Today's Distant yet Convenient Deity," in *Union with Christ: Reframing Theology and Ministry for the Church* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Academic, 2011), 15-34.

haphazard, nor arbitrary, but intentional, purposeful, and profoundly relational. Union reveals that God is not merely a deistic mystery, but is actually knowable.³

In a word, union with Christ means that God is profoundly and personally *for* His people. (cf. Rom. 8:31) Our union with Christ brings all these relational truths, personal promises, and divine attributes together at the same time. These are not merely forensic/legal realities but simultaneously familial/vital. Without a proper understanding of our union with Christ, all of these relational riches become a disconnected constellation of truths rather than a vast panorama of relational truths that together form a dynamic, living, relational bond.

Union and Identity

An identity is the fact of who a person *is*. We all have an identity, a perception of who *we are*. Our identity is often found in what we value, or what we're good at, or in what we desire. Our identity might be in our career, physical appearance, athletic prowess, intellectual acumen, or in our possessions. We look to these things to give us value, acceptance, safety, and belonging—a sense of self. Yet, no created thing can fully satisfy those desires. Why? We are created by God to find that value, acceptance, and belonging with God, in Christ. As Augustine said, “Our heart is restless until it rests in you.”⁴ That happens in union with Christ.

In Christ, we receive an entirely new identity. We've already visited an abbreviated list of what this new identity entails in Figure 2. *In Christ*, we have a new status before God (justified, forgiven, reconciled, etc.). *In Christ*, we have a new relational belonging with God

³ This does not diminish the incomprehensibility of God but, rather, highlights his desire to be known.

⁴ Augustine, *Confessions*, trans. Henry Chadwick (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 3.

(adopted, loved, accepted, indwelt, etc.). *In Christ*, we are made participants in God's promises. *In Christ*, we have a new hope for the future. *In Christ*, we are made part of a new people. These are positional, identity-shaping, realities that are fundamentally true of every believer before God, *in Christ*. They are positional in the sense that they describe our position before God, *in Christ*. In a word, all of the blessings, achievements, benefits, honor, security, steadfast love and grace that belong to Jesus are ours by nature of our union with him. This is why Paul says, "For all things are yours . . . the world or life or the present or the future - all are yours, and you are Christ's" (1 Cor. 3:21-23). This has nothing to do with what we have done, or failed to do, but everything to do with who we are *in*.

The sheer number of these types of positional statements in the NT is overwhelming. It reveals that God views believers in an entirely different light, *in Christ*. This is why followers of Jesus are called "new creations" (2 Cor. 5:17). Practically, this is very important. It means, *in Christ*, God declares who we are: not our emotions, not our friends, not our family, not our coworkers, not our neighbors, not our suffering, not our past, not our present, not our future, not our successes, not our failures, and not our careers. It means, *in Christ*, we do not have to wonder what God thinks of us. It means, *in Christ*, we do not have to wonder what his intentions are toward us. Perhaps most fundamentally, it means, *in Christ*, we don't have to wonder who we are any more. God declares who we are, *in Christ*. Richard Sibbes put it this way:

I am weak in myself but Christ is strong, and I am strong *in him*. I am foolish in myself, but I am wise *in him*. What I lack in myself I have *in him*. He is mine, and his righteousness is mine. . . . Being clothed with this, I stand safe against conscience, hell, wrath and whatsoever. Though I have daily experience of my sins, yet there is more righteousness in Christ, who is mine, and who is the chief of ten thousand, than

there is sin in me.⁵

In a word, *in Christ*, we receive an identity that is life proof.⁶ After all, how should we feel given the reality of our new identity, or this new positional reality, in Christ? Answer: Safe, accepted, approved, loved, hopeful, confident, joy-filled, humbled, and more. This is why one author states, “No part of human identity goes untouched by [our] union with Christ.”⁷

The Christian life, then, is a life increasingly lived out of what is most fundamentally true of us, *in Christ*. In other words, sanctification is the lifelong process of our condition progressively reflecting our position, *in Christ*. This process isn’t one of losing our individual identities, but gaining them. We become more more truly who we really are, *in Christ*. Union with Christ “enhances our humanity to be what God eternally intended it to be.”⁸ After all, “full humanity is humanity in communion with God.”⁹ In other words:

“Union with Christ tells you that Jesus is the center and circumference of authentic human existence. . . . Your real identity, your real self, is waiting to be found *in him*.”¹⁰

To be in union with Christ is to be our true selves.

Unfortunately, many Christians do not know what it true of them, *in Christ*. Placing our faith in Christ is not a business transaction, wherein we deposit “faith” and merely receive forgiveness of sin. Rather, placing our faith in Christ is a relational transaction,

⁵ Michael Reeves, *Rejoicing in Christ*. (Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press Academic, 2015), 69.

⁶ Bill Clem, *Disciple: Getting Your Identity from Jesus* (Wheaton, Illinois: Crossway, 2011), 85.

⁷ Billings, 11.

⁸ Robert Letham, *Union with Christ: In Scripture, History, and Theology* (Phillipsburg, New Jersey: Presbyterian & Reformed, 2011), 126.

⁹ Billings, 11.

¹⁰ Rankin Wilbourne, *Union with Christ: The Way to Know and Enjoy God* (Colorado Springs, Colorado: David C. Cook, 2016), 144. Emphasis added.

wherein we give him our old selves and he makes us new selves. Therefore, *in Christ*, we gain a new relationship with God, a new family, new forgiveness, new love, new hope, new promises, new purpose, a new motivation, a new perspective on life, and a new future. *In Christ*, God gives us an entirely new identity.

Union and Our Joy

Our union with Christ also influences our joy. God does not offer us just any kind of relationship. After all, there are many *kinds* of relationships. Our union with Christ reveals that God offers us a unique, dynamic, multidimensional, profound relational belonging; we in him and he in us. This relationship is unlike any other. *In Christ*, we are brought into the most profound relationship imaginable with the greatest treasure of the universe, God himself. *In Christ*, “[he is] with you always, to the end of the age” (Matt. 28:20). *In Christ*, God will complete the good work he has begun in us (Phil. 1:6). *In Christ*, God is working all things in our lives for our good and his glory (Rom. 8:28). *In Christ*, God knows the numbers of hairs on our head (Luke 12:7). *In Christ*, God is for us, not against us. *In Christ*, God is preparing for us what “no eye has seen nor the heart of man imagined” (1 Cor. 2:9). Therefore, if God is for us, *in Christ*, “who can be against us?” (Rom. 8:31). How could our joy *not* be effected by such profound relational realities?

In Christ, we are personally and profoundly united to the very fountain of joy. We are his forever (Rev. 22:5). He is the pearl of great price and the treasure hidden in the field that is worth selling all that we have to get (Matt. 13:45-47). There is no treasure of greater value than being profoundly relationally united to him. John Calvin described God in this way:

Not only does he sustain this universe by his boundless might, regulate it by his wisdom, preserve it by his goodness, and especially rule mankind by his righteousness and judgment, bear with it in his mercy, watch over it by his protection; but also that no drop will be found either of wisdom and light, or of righteousness or power or rectitude, or of genuine truth, which does not flow from him, and of which he is not the cause. . . . Until men recognize that they owe everything to God, that they are nourished by his fatherly care, that he is the Author of their every good, that they should seek nothing beyond him - they will never yield him willing service. Nay, unless they establish their complete happiness in him, they will never give themselves truly and sincerely to him.¹¹

We are comprehensively united to this God, *in Christ*. This is why Jesus encouraged his disciples to not settle for the lesser joy of ministry success, but revel in the fact that their names were written in heave. (i.e. which points to the reality of belonging to God; Luke 10:29). The privilege of being one of God's own, far outweighs any privilege this world can offer us. This is why the psalmist said, "You make known to me the path of life; in your presence there is *fullness of joy*; at your right hand are pleasures forevermore" (Ps. 16:11). And, "You have more put more *joy* in my heart than when their grain and new wine abound" (Ps. 4:7). Our joy is often connected to circumstances rather than the God of our circumstances, which is why our joy is so fickle. But, *in Christ*, no matter the change that may be happening around us, he does not change. In this life we may waver, but he does not. Without an adequate understanding of the nature of our relationship with God, *in Christ*, our joy suffers. Yet, as the reality of being personally and profoundly united to the greatest good of the universe grips our hearts, our joy deepens. John Murray explains it this way:

Union with Christ has its source in the election of God the Father before the foundation of the world and has its fruition in the glorification of the sons of God. The perspective of God's people is not narrow; it is broad and it is long. It isn't confined to space and time; it has the expanse of eternity. Its orbit has two foci, one

¹¹ John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, trans. Ford Lewis Battles, ed. John T. McNeill (Philadelphia; London: Westminster Press, 1960), 1.2.1.

the electing love of God the Father in the counsels of eternity; the other glorification with Christ in the manifesto of his glory. The former has no beginning, the latter has no end. . . . Why does the believer entertain the thought of God's determinate counsel with such *joy*? Why can he have patience in the perplexities and adversities of the present? Why can he have confident assurance with reference to the future and rejoice in hope of the glory of God? It is because he cannot think of past, present, or future apart from union with Christ.¹²

A greater understanding of our union with Christ will lead to greater joy.

Union contra Legalism and Licentiousness

Rightly understanding, and living out of, our union with Christ will also help us confront the dual errors of legalism and licentiousness.¹³ Legalism is the mistaken, often subtle, belief that what we do determines how God feels about us. Legalism says, "If I obey, then I will be loved by God." Legalism is fueled by uncertainty around our status with God, questions about where we stand with him, and concerns about what exactly he requires of us. In a word, legalism emerges when the nature of the relationship God offers us, *in Christ*, is misunderstood.

Yet, it is exactly these questions and concerns that union with Christ clarifies. Regarding our status before God, *in Christ*, we are saved by grace, not by works (Eph. 2:8-10). Regarding our standing with God, *in Christ*, we are fully forgiven, loved, and adopted (1 John 1:9; Rom. 8:37-39; Eph. 1:5). Regarding what God requires of us, *in Christ*, our debt has been paid (Col. 2:14). Our response to Jesus' saving work is not that of earning but of trust. As Jesus said, "This is the work of God, that you *believe* in him whom he has

¹² John Murray, *Redemption Accomplished and Applied* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 1955), 164. Emphasis added.

¹³ This is not a reference to legalistic religions, but when Christianity is distorted into legalism.

sent” (John 6:29).¹⁴ God wants us to know where we stand with him. The Christian life is about so much more than merely avoiding sin, as legalism leads us to believe. Properly understanding our union with Christ helps us avoid the soul-suffocating error of legalism by revealing the profound nature of the gracious relational belonging that God offers us, in Christ.

On the other end of the spectrum is licentiousness. This is the erroneous belief that, in light of God’s grace, we can disregard God’s commands and live however we want. Like legalism, licentiousness is fueled by a mistaken notion of what exactly God is inviting us to. Licentiousness views the offer of the gospel as a pass for sin *against* God instead of a transformative relationship *with* God. Properly understanding our union with Christ helps us avoid licentiousness because it clarifies what God is ultimately after, *in Christ*. Union clarifies not only what God has saved us *from*, but who he has saved us *for*.¹⁵ *In Christ*, we learn that salvation is ultimately relational so his instruction to us must always be viewed in that light. Sinclair Ferguson notes:

There is only one genuine cure for legalism. It is the same medicine the gospel prescribes for antinomianism [i.e. licentiousness]: understanding and tasting union with Jesus Christ himself.¹⁶

The offer of the gospel is not a to-do list (i.e. legalism), nor a pass for sin (i.e. licentiousness), but a radical new way of being human in a personal and profound, inter-connected relationship with the living God, *in Christ*.

¹⁴ It is interesting to note that faith, being inherently relational, is the means by which this union is forged.

¹⁵ Wilbourne, 176.

¹⁶ Sinclair Ferguson, *The Whole Christ: Legalism, Antinomianism, and Gospel Assurance: Why the Marrow Controversy Still Matters* (Wheaton, Illinois: Crossway, 2016), 157.

Union and the Local Church

Understanding the nature of our relationship with God, *in Christ*, also impacts how we view Jesus' local church. The church is God's idea. "Church" is the term the Bible uses to describe the body of individuals whom God has redeemed for his glory and brought into a unique, dynamic, multidimensional, profound relational belonging, *in Christ*. The church, local and global, is a living display of the corporate side of our union with Christ. We are saved, *in Christ*, to belong to him and one another. This is why the authors of the NT are so concerned with how those within the church treat one another.¹⁷

Practically speaking, therefore, the church is not something invented by humans. The church is not a club, nor voluntary association, nor customer service provider, nor a group of loosely affiliated individuals, nor an optional exercise for the committed. The church is comprised of those who are, together, in living union with the living God of the universe, in Jesus. This is why the NT uses such vivid metaphors to describe what the church *is*: family, citizens, flock, bride, living temple, and more.¹⁸ These metaphors describe a brand new relational reality that exists between God and his people, and one another, *in Christ*. In other words, when we consider the church we are referring to a supernatural, not natural, reality.

The local church, therefore, is not a naturally occurring phenomena. The local church is the outworking of the redemptive purposes of God, *in Christ*, to personally and profoundly unite his people with him. Jesus lived, died, and gave himself up, for the *church* (Eph. 5:25; John 3:16-17). Jesus is the head of the *church* (Eph. 1:22-23; 5:23; Col. 1:8). Jesus cleanses,

¹⁷ For example, "If anyone says, 'I love God,' and hates his brother, he is a liar; for he who does not love his brother whom he has seen cannot love God whom he has not seen. And this commandment we have from him: whoever loves God must also love his brother." (1 John 4:20-21)

¹⁸ See "Metaphors for Union" in chapter two, *A Systematic Theology of Union*.

nourishes, and cherishes the *church* (Eph. 5:27, 29). Jesus promises to build his *church* (Matt. 16:18). Jesus is the Apostle and High Priest of the *church* (Heb. 3:1). Jesus lives to make intercession for the *church* (Heb. 7:25). All of history is marching toward the day when Jesus will be with His *church* (Rev. 19:6ff)—the people to whom he is deeply, personally and profoundly united. Timmis and De La Hoyde comment:

We are inextricably united with all those who are also united with Him. The church belongs to Christ; Christ belongs to the church; and those who are in Christ belong to one another . . . a cosmic view of the church will utterly transform your attitude to your local church.¹⁹

Without an adequate understanding of the nature of our relationship with God, *in Christ*, we will miss the depths of the supernatural reality of what the Church is. The church lies at the very heart of God and therefore it should lie close to our heart as well.

Union and Preaching

The personal and profound relationship that God forges with his people, *in Christ*, should also effect how pastors approach preaching. Why? If we don't have a sense of the connectedness of the Scripture, and in God's overarching purposes throughout, then it is very easy for preaching to devolve into a series of separate topics (even if one is preaching systematically through a single book). The inevitable result is a set of disconnected sermons on justification, another on sanctification, another on spiritual disciplines, another on racial reconciliation, another on marriage, another on the grace of God, another on anger, and so forth. Yet, what holds all of these together? Union with Christ holds them together.

¹⁹ Steve Timmis and Christopher De La Hoyde. *In Christ: In Him Together for the World* (Fearn, Scotland: Christian Focus Publications, 2014), 52, 55.

To be clear, it is not as though these topics are unbiblical nor that addressing them in this manner is unhelpful. The overarching goal in preaching is to be faithful to the text while meaningfully applying the truth therein to the lives of the people present. But, at the same time, we need to think more deeply about how our preaching is *training* Jesus' people to understand what God is doing in the world. Most people view the Bible as containing a vast array of quasi-related instructions and often our preaching does little to combat that notion (likely because it was the preaching that created that notion). God is forging a people, in Christ, to whom he is personally and profoundly related. Everything proceeds from there. So, for example, justification is about entering into this union. Sanctification is the process of growth within this union. Marriage ultimately points to this union. Ethnic reconciliation is an implication of Jesus tearing down walls to establish this union. Spiritual disciplines are means of cultivating communion within this union. The grace of God is the means by which this union was forged and is empowered. We could go on. In other words, a theologically robust understanding of union creates a biblical and comprehensive lens through which to preach.

What God is doing, from beginning to end, is calling out a people to whom he is profoundly relationally united from all tribes, tongues and nations for his own glory. This needs to be kept in view with all preaching, whether from the pentateuch, historical narrative, prophets, gospels, epistles or revelation. Doing so enriches our study and, importantly, keeps us coming back to the incredible nature of our relationship with God, *in Christ*, through whatever angle the text presents on any given week.

Union and the Sacraments

Our union with Christ also impacts how we understand the sacraments (or, ordinances) of baptism and communion. Baptism marks the beginning of the personal and profound relational reality of being *in Christ*, while the Lord's Supper marks its continuance. These sacraments are by nature, participatory.²⁰ They serve to identify those who, through faith, have participated in Jesus' death and resurrection.

Baptism points to a believers profound identification with Jesus in his death, burial, and resurrection. As Paul says:

[We] who have been baptized *into Christ Jesus* were baptized into his death. . . . We were buried therefore with him by baptism into death, in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life (Rom. 6:4).

In other words, baptism is a depiction of the relational reality of a believer being personally and profoundly united to Christ in his death and resurrection. Because we are united to Christ, his death is our death and his resurrection is our resurrection, therefore we must live as though "our old self was crucified with him" (Rom. 6:6) and "present [ourselves] to God as those who have been brought from death to life" (Rom. 6:13). By participating in baptism, we are symbolically participating in these union realities.

While baptism points to the start of this new relational reality, the Lord's Supper points to its ongoing nature. As Peterson says, "baptism signifies union with Christ once and for all, while the Lord's Supper signifies ongoing union and communion with Christ."²¹

²⁰ Grant Macaskill, *Union with Christ in the New Testament* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 192.

²¹ Robert A. Peterson, Robert, *Salvation Applied by the Spirit: Union with Christ*. (Wheaton, Illinois: Crossway, 2015), 395.

During the institution of the Lord's Supper, Jesus explained that his body and blood (i.e. his sacrificial death) would inaugurate the new covenant realities long-promised by God (Matt. 26:26-29; Mark 14:24; Luke 22:20). Therefore, Paul later added, "as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes" (1 Cor. 11:26). The phrase "proclaim the Lord's death" is shorthand for the new covenant realities his death achieved. In other words, what is being remembered in the Lord's Supper are the new covenant realities that Jesus achieved that we now participate in, by faith. As we have seen, the essence of the new covenant is a personal and profound relationship with God, *in Christ*. Therefore, when we celebrate the Lord's Supper, taking in the bread and wine, we are demonstrating our participating in this living, profound, covenantal relationship. As Paul said:

The cup of blessing, is it not a *participation* in the blood of Christ? The bread that we break, is it not a *participation* in the body of Christ? (1 Cor. 10:16).

In this way, our union with Christ deepens our understanding of the sacraments.

Union and Prayer

A right understanding of union with Christ also impacts how and why we pray. It is easy for prayer to degenerate into mere formality, at best, or something we don't do at all, at worst. Why is that? The reasons are multitudinous. We are busy. We question whether we need it. We wonder if God actually hears, let alone answers, us. Our feelings for God wax and wane and we can't help but think God's feelings for us do the same.

However, remembering the personal and profound nature of the grace-created relational belonging that God forges with his people, *in Christ*, provides ample confidence

and motivation for prayer. Our union with Christ reveals that we are in him and that he is in us. Knowing this, “our consciences are calmed, and we can freely call on God as a gentle Father by the Spirit.”²² We are represented by him, we are found in him, we are present with him, we belong to him, and we are indwelt by him. In other words, God is utterly for us. Nothing can separate us from his love, *in Christ*. There is no more condemnation for those, *in Christ*. He is personally invested in the well-being of his people, *in Christ*. We are now adopted sons and daughters of the Father, *in Christ*. He is always near, *in Christ*. He is working all things for the good of those who love him, *in Christ*. In other words, *in Christ*, we “find glad entrance to the Father.”²³

It is crucial to highlight that these are not separate, isolated realities. These realities are all part of the deeply personal and profoundly interwoven tapestry of the unique relationship God has forged with his people, *in Christ*. As the reality of the nature of this relationship becomes increasingly real to us, we will move toward him. Union with Christ allows us to approach God in freedom, joy, humble confidence, and incredibly honesty. *In Christ*, we can be ourselves. *In Christ*, we can be certain of how God feels about us. *In Christ*, we know that God will not turn us away. *In Christ*, we are loved by God and nothing can change that. Sinclair Ferguson adds these helpful words:

The knowledge of our union with Christ . . . gives us confidence in prayer. It was when Jesus had begun to expound the closeness of this union that he also began to introduce the disciples to the true heart of prayer. If Christ abides in us and we abide in him, as his word dwells in us, and we pray in his name, that God hears us (Jn 15:4-7). But all of these expressions are simply extensions of the one fundamental

²² Billings, 30.

²³ D.F. Kelly, “Prayer and Union with Christ: The Rutherford Lecture for 1988,” *Scottish Bulletin of Evangelical Theology* 8 (1990): 124.

idea: If I am united to Christ, then all that is his is mine. So long as my heart, will and mind are one with Christ's in his word, I can approach God with the humble confidence that my prayers will be heard and answered.²⁴

Understanding union with Christ transforms prayer into communion with the one with whom we are profoundly united.

Union and the Battle Against Indwelling Sin

A right understanding of union with Christ also effects how we battle indwelling sin. Followers of Jesus continue to wrestle with vestiges of sin. How does sin entice us? Sin tempts us to believe God is withholding from us. Sin tempts us to question God's goodness. Sin tempts us to believe God is not interested in us or that he won't help us. When all else fails, sin tempts us to believe God will forgive us anyway. So, we wonder: Is God for me? Does he care? Does he have my best interest in mind? Is he really present or just preoccupied somewhere else? Does he know me or am I just one of a multitude? Notice how all of these are relational questions.

Yet, viewing these lies in light of our union proves to be a tremendous source of strength. Our union reveals them for what they are—lies. *In Christ*, God has forged a relationship with us that is utterly unique, personal, and profound. *In Christ*, God is in us and we are in him. God is not withholding from us for, *in Christ*, he has given us all things (Rom. 8:32). God has done more than anyone could ever do for us, *in Christ*. He will not allow us to be tempted beyond what we can bear (1 Cor. 10:13). We can know, beyond a doubt, that he has our best interest in mind at all times. He will never leave us nor forsake us (Heb. 13:5).

²⁴ Sinclair Ferguson, *The Christian Life: A Doctrinal Introduction* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1997), 105.

Again, these aren't merely individual, isolated truths, but different aspects of our multidimensional union with God, *in Christ*. Understanding the breadth and depth of our union can help battle the lies that lead to sin.

At the same time, while it is true that God will forgive our sin, it is not true that sin will not have real consequences in our lives. Sin always has consequences. *In Christ*, while sin cannot effect our position before God, sin always impacts the condition of our relationship with God. That is why Paul warns believers against quenching (1 Thess. 5:19) and grieving (Eph. 4:30) the Spirit. It is important to not move past this too quickly. Again, this is relational language. The Spirit is grieved when we blatantly sin. In other words, when we blatantly sin we are not merely creating relational distance with a God who is already at a distance. Our union with Christ helps us recognize that when we sin, we sin against God who is *within* us. This is an incredibly helpful deterrent.

Union with Christ help us battle indwelling sin by helping us understand the profound nature of the relationship God has forged with us, *in Christ*. Michael Reeves points out:

If holiness is not first and foremost about knowing Christ, it will be about self-produced morality and religiosity. But such incurred self-dependence is quite the opposite of what pleases God...He wants us to share his pleasure in the Son.²⁵

How do we do that? By reveling in God and all that he is for us, *in Christ*. He is with us, in us, and entirely for us, *in Christ*. He is vested in our welfare, *in Christ*. He is always near and ready to help, *in Christ*. Just think about the resources we carry within us, *in Christ*.²⁶ He is a sure guide and source of strength amidst the throes of temptation to sin, *in Christ*.

²⁵ Reeves, 86.

²⁶ Wilbourne, 52.

Union and Christus Exemplar

A right understanding of union with Christ also effects how we understand Jesus serves as our example (or, *Christus exemplar*). The NT teaches, in a variety of ways, that Christ serves as our example, but we need to understand this in context of our union.²⁷ If not, we will view Jesus as a mere moral example and see obedience as a mimicking of his life. Jesus is not merely an example we observe from afar. Christ is our example in the sense that a father is an example to his son. The son is profoundly shaped and influenced by *who* the father is and *what* he does. But, this influence doesn't happen merely through the son's external observation. The influence happens through the *nature of the relationship* the son has with the father. Inevitably, the son takes on the mannerisms, values, and interests of his father due to the inherent depth of the father-son relationship.

Christ serves as the example of his people in the same way. He doesn't serve as a naked example, as someone we merely observe from afar, but as our transformative example, as someone we know personally up-close. A careful reading of the NT will reveal regular calls to the follower of Christ to, "forgive one another, *as God in Christ* forgave you" (Eph. 4:32; Col. 3:13), "walk in love, *as Christ* loved us and gave himself up for us" (Eph. 5:1), or "welcome one another *as Christ* has welcomed you," (Rom. 15:7) and more. These are not commands to follow Jesus as a naked example, but to follow him in such a way that we are/do for others what he is/does personally for us.

²⁷ 1 Peter 2:21, "For to this you have been called, because Christ also suffered for you, *leaving you an example*, so that you might follow in his steps." Heb 12:3, "*Consider him* who endured from sinners such hostility against himself, so that you may not grow weary or fainthearted." Phil 2:5-7, "*Have this mind* among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men."

This is worthy of reflection. This indicates the truest meaning of *Christus exemplar* is allowing *how* Jesus relates to us to shape *how* we relate to others. In other words, we don't learn to be forgiving by trying to be forgiving. We learn to forgive by reflecting on how Christ has forgiven us. We don't learn to walk in love by trying to walk in love. We learn to walk in love by reflecting on how Christ has loved us. We don't learn to welcome others by trying to be welcoming. We learn to welcome others by reflecting on how Christ has welcomed us. John summarized it this way, "whoever says he abides in him [i.e. is in union with Christ] ought to walk in the same way in which he walked" (1 John 2:6). John is saying the nature of our personal and profound relationship that God has forged with his people, *in Christ*, will produce a changed life that looks like Jesus.²⁸ This profound union, then, informs and inspires our obedience by pointing us to Jesus as our transformative example.

Union and Perseverance of the Saints

A right understanding of union with Christ also effects how we understand the perseverance of the saints. The very nature of the union that God forges with his people, *in Christ*, is unbreakable. *In Christ*, we are in him and he is in us. While debates about perseverance continue, they would be greatly served by revisiting the reality of this union. After all, whether or not Jesus' people will indeed persevere is dependent upon the nature of the relationship he has forged with them. Does the nature of this relationship allow room for

²⁸ Jesus says something similar in a number of places in the Gospels. In one case, he says, "He who is forgiven little, loves little." (Luke 7:47) Jesus says that the degree to which we believe we are loved by God is directly related to how we will love God. If we believe we have been forgiven little, then we will love little. If we recognize that we have been forgiven much, we will love much. Another instance of this is in Matt. 18:21-35 in the "Parable of the Unforgiving Servant" where he says, "Should you not have had mercy on your fellow servant, as I had mercy on you?" Jesus' point there is that the magnitude of mercy we've received from God should make us a radically merciful people.

walking away? Can this grace-created, faith-forged relational belonging with God, *in Christ*, be undone? Given the course of our study, the answer to that is an emphatic no.

Understanding this also impacts our assurance. Calvin too made the same connection, saying:

in so far as assurance of salvation is concerned, to think of himself no otherwise than as a member of Christ, so as to reckon all Christ's benefits his own. Thus he will obtain an unwavering hope of final perseverance, if he reckons himself a member of him who is *beyond all hazard of falling away*.²⁹

In Christ, we are brought into a living, personal and profound union with God. *In Christ*, we are represented by him, found in him, present with him, belong to him, and indwelt by him.

Can such a relationship be dismantled? No. *In Christ* we are “beyond all hazard of falling away.”

Applied Theology Summary

The purpose of this section is to demonstrate that a biblically robust understanding of our union with Christ is vital to the flourishing of Jesus' people, as his disciples and his church. Without a proper understanding of our union with Christ, all of the relational riches God offers us becomes a vast array of standalone truths rather than a beautiful, seamless, living relational bond. Without a proper understanding of our union with Christ, we will miss what it means to be made new creations, *in Christ*, and the profound reality of being given an identity that is life proof, in him. Without a proper understanding of our union with Christ we will miss out on the joy that comes from understanding we are personally and profoundly united to the Greatest Good of the universe. Without a proper understanding of our union

²⁹ John Calvin, *Commentary on 1 Corinthians*, trans. Thomas Myers (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Books, 2003), 61. Emphasis added.

with Christ we will find it easier to slip into the soul-shrinking errors of legalism or licentiousness.

Without a proper understanding of our union with Christ we will miss the profound supernatural reality of Jesus' church, comprised of those who are, together, in living union with the living God, in Jesus. Without a proper understanding of our union with Christ preaching can easily devolve into a series of topics, albeit biblical, while neglecting the connecting fabric of God's larger purposes of calling out a people to whom he is profoundly relationally united. Without a proper understanding of our union with Christ we will miss the deeper relational meaning found within the sacraments of baptism and the Lord's Supper. Without a proper understanding of our union with Christ our prayer life can easily become a formality, rather than a vital aspect of communing with God with whom we are in union.

Without a proper understanding of our union with Christ we won't be as equipped to battle indwelling sin nor really appreciate the calls to not grieve or quench the Spirit. Without a proper understanding of our union with Christ we will tend to understand *Christus exemplar* in terms of merely mimicking Jesus' life, rather than understanding it as a reality birthed out of being personally and profoundly united to him. Without a proper understanding of our union with Christ we will be prone to question the grounds of our perseverance and, by implication, our assurance. Taken together, we can see that a biblically robust understanding of our union with Christ is vital to the flourishing of Jesus' people, as his disciples and his church.

CHAPTER 6

CONCLUSION

Being *in Christ* is the essence of Christian proclamation and experience . . .
without treating the *in Christ* motif we miss the heart of the Christian message.
—Richard Longnecker, *Galatians*

Union with Christ is an utterly unique, dynamic, multidimensional, profound relational belonging that God forges with his people, *in Christ*. This union is “utterly unique” in that there is no other relationship like it, in the universe, available to a human. This union is “dynamic” in that the relational realities it encompasses are organic, living, and growing, as opposed to static, inert and mechanical. This union is “multidimensional” in that it is forensic yet familial, individual yet corporate, and present yet future. Further, at its essence, this union is one of “profound relational belonging”; we are *in Christ* and he is *in us*. In other words, to be *in Christ* is to be brought into a whole new realm of belonging and being in relationship with God. This is why the Scriptures teach that, “If anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation” (2 Cor. 5:17).

This union is like marriage, yet far more intimate. It is like being born again, yet encountering realities far more profound. It is like the relationship of living stones mortared together, yet far more relationally secure. It is like the relationship of the members of a human body, yet far more comprehensive. It is like the relationship of a vine to its branches, yet far more dynamic. It is like the relationship of a shepherd to his sheep, yet far more

personal. It is like the relationship of family members, yet far more loving. This union is more durable, longer lasting, more personal, profoundly safer, and more meaning-*full* than any relationship this world offers. As such, union with Christ is not a theological aside, abstract idea, nor mere academic fodder. Rather, this union is absolutely central to God's purposes in the universe—and in our lives.

As such, the purpose of this thesis is to demonstrate that a biblically robust understanding of this union is vital to the flourishing of Jesus' people, as his disciples and his church. This study is needed for three primary reasons. First, most work on union with Christ tends to be highly academic and, therefore, out of reach to the Church-at-large. Additionally, to the average follower of Jesus, Christianity can appear to be a constellation of loosely connected doctrinal truths rather than a relational whole. We need a category for understanding all that God is, and is for us, in Christ. Lastly, popular-level work on union with Christ is rare and under-applied. In other words, we need this study, along with others like it.

From the outset, it was noted that the greatest good of our union with Christ isn't the union itself, but the One to whom we are united. God is the greatest ground of our joy, not our union. This must be reiterated. But, this doctrine is not in any more danger of overshadowing the supremacy of God than another. Rather, rightly understood, grasping the incomparable riches of this union *with* Christ helps us to more fully comprehend the unsearchable riches *of* Christ. The greatest gift of our union with Christ is Christ himself. If we want to understand God, we should seek to understand the nature of the relationship that he offers us, in Christ.

The approach of this thesis is interdisciplinary, including systematic, biblical, historical, and applied theologies. Through the first three disciplines a biblically robust understanding of union with Christ is developed. The study then concludes with an application of this doctrine to the everyday lives of Jesus' people. Let's briefly consider each, in turn.

Chapter two, *A Systematic Theology of Union*, reveals that the NT employs a variety of prepositions, metaphors, and interrelated relational dimensions to describe a relationship between God and his people, *in Christ*, that is personal, profound, and utterly unique.

Chapter three, *A Biblical Theology of Union*, demonstrates that God's desire for a personal and profound relationship with his people progressively develops across the redemptive storyline and reaches its climactic fulfillment in Jesus.

Chapter four, *A History of Union*, describes how the doctrine of union with Christ plays a central role throughout the history of the church, with many leading theologians viewing this vital, personal, and profound union as the very essence of Christianity.

Chapter five, *An Applied Theology of Union*, explains how union with Christ is vital to the flourishing of Jesus' people in a variety of areas, including: how we view God, how we see ourselves, how we avoid legalism and licentiousness, our understanding of the local church, how we approach preaching and the sacraments, our prayer life, the battle against indwelling sin, how we see Jesus as our example, and our perseverance. In other words, since union with Christ deals with the essence of a Christian's relationship with God, *in Christ*, it impacts and informs every area of a Christian's life.

When taken together it is apparent that a biblically robust understanding of our union with Christ is indeed vital to the flourishing of Jesus' people, as his disciples and his church. The Church would be served well by additional study here.

To this day, God continues to orchestrate the spread of the gospel of Jesus across millennia and continents, as he forms a people, *in Christ*, who are personally and profoundly his. There is a day coming when he will return and all things will be fully, and finally, united in him (Eph. 1:10). He will then deliver the kingdom to his Father (1 Cor. 15:24). Even more, on that day, we will finally enter into eternal glory, *in Christ*, with Christ. As such, it is the highest privilege in the universe to belong to God, *in Christ*.

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