

Union with Christ

by Michael Horton, Ph.D.

Salvador was a Cuban spy, sent to Miami as a mole in order to learn military secrets from the United States government. However, Cuban nationalists with whom Salvador associated incognito eventually led the clever spy to renounce his loyalties to Castro. As a result, Salvador turned himself in to the United States government and they offered assylum, protection, and a new identity. The government masterminded a "murder" of Salvador so Castro's officials would assume the death of their spy, and once this plan was carried out Salvador was issued new documents, a new name, and a new life.

Paul appeals to this sort of language when he answers the question, "What shall we say then? Shall we continue in sin that grace may abound?" with his familiar response, "Heaven forbid! How shall we who have died to sin live any longer in it? Or do you not know that as many of you as were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? Therefore, we were buried with him through baptism into death, that just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, even so we also should walk in newness of life. For if we have been united together in the likeness of his death, certainly we also shall be in the likeness of his resurrection" (Ro.6:1-5).

The apostle goes on to speak of the crucifixion of our old identity and its burial, as the believer is raised with a new life. "Let us never forget that our old selves died with him on the cross that the tyranny of sin over us might be broken—for a dead man can safely be said to be free from the power of sin" (v.7, Phillips Trans.)

Israel had long sought its identity in conforming to the Law. By outward observance, many thought union with the Law and with Moses would lead to the identity which brought fulfillment, hope, and salvation. But Christ alone possessed in himself, in his essence as well as in his actions, the righteousness which God required of humanity. Therefore, only through union with Christ could the believer enjoy the identity of belonging to God. "For sin can never be your master—you are no longer living under the Law, but under grace" (v.14).

This new identity is not something we achieve by converting ourselves or by trying to enter into it. It is given to us graciously by God, apart from and outside of ourselves. Just as Salvador could never again return to his former identity and owed his loyalty to those who had given him the new identity, so "released from the service of sin, you entered the service of righteousness" (v.19). Before, righteousness made no claims on us to which we could respond favorably, but now, because we are united to Christ, new affections and new loyalties produce new service.

It is important to realize that Christ does not come to improve the old self, to guide and redirect it to a better life; he comes to kill us, in order to raise us to newness of life. He is not the friend of the old self, only too happy to be of service. He is its mortal enemy, bent on replacing it with a new self. Notice that the new birth is not the same as

justification. The contemporary Wesleyan theologian, John Lawson, confuses justification and the new birth in precisely the same manner as medieval scholasticism: "To be justified is the first and all-important stage in a renewed manner of life, actually changed for the better in mind and heart, in will and action." Further, "regeneration is an alternative word for the initial step in the life of saving faith in Christ. The legal term 'justification' has in mind this step..." (Intro. to Christian Doctrine:Zondervan, pp..226-7).

We are not justified by conversion; rather, conversion or the new birth is the gift of God given to those who are spiritually dead and, therefore, unable to choose Christ. In the new birth, God grants the faith necessary to respond positively and it is through this faith, not conversion itself, that one is accepted by God.

What Is "Union With Christ" ?

If this doctrine is, as John Murray wrote, "the central truth of the whole doctrine of salvation," what does it mean and why is it so important?

First, union with Christ describes the reality of which Paul wrote in Romans chapter six. As a husband and wife are united through marriage and a parent and a child are united through birth, so we are united to Christ through the Spirit's baptism. Those who are familiar with the historical (if not contemporary) discourses of Reformed and Lutheran preaching will immediately recognize the emphasis on the objective work of Christ in history. Themes such as election, the incarnation, the substitutionary atonement, the active and passive obedience of Christ, justification, adoption, and the objective aspect of sanctification (i.e., the declaration that we are already holy in Christ), form the diet of the best and most biblically faithful preaching. Each of these themes serves to remind the believer that his or her righteousness is found not within, but outside.

Nevertheless, there is a subjective aspect to our union with Christ which receives equal attention in Scripture and, therefore, commands equal attention from us. Calvin wrote, "We must understand that as long as Christ remains outside of us, and we are separated from him, all that he has suffered and done for the salvation of the human race remains useless and of no value for us....All that he possesses is nothing to us until we grow into one body with him" (Institutes, III.i.1).

All of our righteousness, holiness, redemption, and blessing is found outside of us—in the person and work of Christ. This was the declaration of the Scriptures and, following the sacred text, of the reformers, in the face of a subjective righteousness located in the believer. And yet, as Calvin points out, this "alien righteousness" belonging to someone outside of us would mean nothing if this righteous one remained forever outside of us.

An illustration might help at this point. In my junior year of college, I went to Europe with some friends and ran out of money. Happily, my parents agreed to deposit enough money in my account to cover my expenses. Was that now my money? I had not earned it. I had not worked for it. It was not my money in the sense that I had done something to obtain it. But it was in my account now and I could consider it my own property.

While none of our righteousness is our own, Christ is! While none of our holiness belongs to us, properly speaking, Christ does! The devils know Christ is righteous, but they do not, cannot, believe that he is their righteousness.

It is essential, therefore, to point unbelievers and believers alike to Christ outside of their own subjective experiences and actions, but that is only half the story! The Christ who has done everything necessary for our salvation in history outside of us now comes to indwell us in the person of his Holy Spirit. "God has chosen to make known among the Gentiles the glorious riches of this mystery, which is Christ in you, the hope of glory" (Col.1:27). While our assurance is rooted in the objective work of Christ for us, it is also true that "We know that we live in him and he in us, because he has given us of his Spirit" (1 Jn.4:13).

John employs this language of union in his Gospel, where Jesus is referred to as a vine, with believers as branches (Jn.15). As the branch is dead apart from the life-giving nourishment of the vine, so humans are spiritually dead unless they are connected to the vine. Elsewhere, "Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood remains in me, and I in him" (Jn.6:56). As baptism is a sign and seal of our attachment to the vine (the beginning of our union), the Lord's Supper is a sign and seal of our perpetual nourishment from the vine.

Paul appeals to this doctrine as the organizing principle for his entire systematic theology. The First Adam-Second Adam contrast in Romans five depends on this notion. "In Adam," we possess all that he possesses: original sin, judgment, condemnation, fear, alienation; "in Christ" we possess all of his righteousness, holiness, eternal life, justification, adoption, and blessing. Further, "Even when we were dead in trespasses, God made us alive together with Christ (by grace you have been saved), and raised us up together, and made us sit together in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus..." (Eph. 2:5). "I have been crucified with Christ," Paul declares, "and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me" (Gal.2:20).

Thus, this doctrine is the wheel which unites the spokes of salvation and keeps them in proper perspective. "In Christ" (i.e., through union with him) appears, by my accounting, nine times in the first chapter of Ephesians. Chosen in Christ before the foundation of the world, God has thus "made us accepted in the Beloved." He cannot love us directly because of our sinfulness, but he can love us in union with Christ, because he is the one the Father loves. "In him we have redemption"; "in him we have an inheritance," and so on.

Union with Christ and Conversion

This doctrine is another way of saying, "Christ alone!" All spiritual blessings in heavenly places are found in him. Even the gifts of the Holy Spirit are through and for the ministry of Christ the Mediator. No one is baptized in the Holy Spirit, but baptized by the Holy Spirit into Christ.

Regeneration, or the new birth, is the commencement of this union. God brings this connection and baptism even before there is any sign of life—"while you were dead...he

made you alive" (Eph.2:1). The first gift of this union is faith, the sole instrument through which we live and remain on this vine. But this is a rich vine, pregnant with nourishing sap to produce an abundance of fruit. Though we are not attached to nor remain attached to this vine by the fruit (what branch depends on the fruit?), those who are truly members of Christ inevitably produce fruit. Through union with Christ, we receive his righteousness imputed (justification) as well as his righteousness imparted (sanctification).

So conversion to Christ is one aspect of a prior work of God's grace in uniting us to his Son. At this point, then, it is essential to relate this to contemporary concerns.

1) Two-Stage Schemes

Human-centered religion has always created two paths to life: one for the spiritually-gifted and another for those who settle for heaven, but not the "abundant life." Roman Catholicism (medieval and modern) has offered this in terms of distinguishing between the priesthood and others in the category of "the religious" on one hand, and "the seculars." Further, there are those who have indulged in venial sins (those which can interrupt fellowship with God) and mortal sins (those which can clear the board and make one start from scratch).

Evangelicals have done this, in part, by following the "Higher Life" version of conversion and the Christian life, in which super-saints (often involved in "full-time Christian ministry") are "filled with the Spirit," while normal (i.e., "carnal") Christians make it to heaven, but without having any of the gifts of the Spirit.

"The Holy Spirit will fill us with His power the moment we are fully yielded," declares Bill Bright, founder of Campus Crusade for Christ. "God would be breaking His own spiritual laws if He forced man to do His bidding." It's a tragedy that "At the time of conversion the will of man is temporarily yielded to the will of God," but "after conversion, the heart frequently loses its first love" and therefore requires us to seek another filling. Just as the medieval believer required some ritual in order to fill up the bathtub of grace that had begun leaking from a venial sin, Bill Bright urges, "If a Christian is not filled, he is disobedient to the command of God and is sinning against God." What is required is for the carnal Christian to follow the steps which would have been familiar to the medieval monk: First, "meditate"; second, "make it a practice to spend definite time each day in prayer for God's guidance..."; one must also confess each sin, since "unconfessed sin keeps many Christians from being filled with the Holy Spirit" (Handbook for Christian Maturity, CCCI, pp.133-145).

Charles Finney is even approvingly quoted by Bright: "Christians are as guilty for not being filled with the Holy Spirit as sinners are for not repenting. They are even more so, for as they have more light, they are so much the more guilty." And Norman B. Harrison is cited: "The Spirit-filled life...is the only life that can please God." Of course, the Reformation heirs reply to today's medieval heirs, that there is only one life that can please God, and that is Christ's. And because his life is accepted and we are in him, hidden as it were, we are pleasing to God and are filled with the Spirit because every believer possesses everything of Christ's.

What kind of father shares himself and his possessions with only a few favorites and withholds his best from others? Perhaps some would answer, "It's not a matter of the generosity of the father, but of the children's willingness to receive." While that is logically coherent, it reveals a fundamentally different theological perspective. Union with Christ is not the result of human decision, striving, seeking, yielding, or surrendering, but of Christ's. While we are called to be "filled with the Spirit" (Gal.5:18), it is a figure of speech: "Do not be drunk with wine...but be filled with the Spirit." In other words, make sure you're under the right influence!

2) Confusing Indicative and Imperative

Everywhere the Scriptures provide both the declaration of who we are in Christ (indicative) and the command to respond to that particular declaration in a certain way (imperative). For instance, Paul does not simply issue an imperative like, "Stop living with your boyfriend." He says, "How should we who have died to sin live any longer in it?" Paul does not call people to die to sin; he does not invite them to enter into a higher level of abundant life; there are not appeals to become something which the believer is not already. The believer has died, is buried, is raised, is seated with Christ in the heavenlies, and so on. These are not plateaus for victorious Christians who have surrendered all, but realities for every believer regardless of how small one's faith or how weak one's repentance.

Thus, we must stop trying to convert believers into these realities by imperatives: "Do this," "Confess that," "Follow these steps," and so on. Union with Christ ushers us into conversion and conversion ushers us immediately into all of these realities so that, as Sinclair Ferguson writes, "The determining factor of my existence is no longer my past. It is Christ's past" (Christian Spirituality: Five Views, Zondervan, p.57).

For those who speak as though the filling of the Spirit, the gifts of the Spirit, justification, the new birth, and union with Christ are things to be attained by obedience to imperatives, Paul insists, "But of him[God] you are in Christ Jesus, who became for us wisdom from God—and righteousness and sanctification and redemption—that, as it is written, 'He who glories, let him glory in the Lord'" (1 Cor.1:30-31).

3) Quietism & Legalism

Some Christians so emphasize a "let go and let God" passivity that even after conversion they act as though they believe they are still "dead in trespasses and sins" and do not "understand the things of the Spirit of God." Wanting to attribute everything to grace and God's work, they confuse justification and sanctification just as surely as those who want to underscore human involvement. In our initial conversion we are passive: acted upon rather than active, as Luther put it. We are justified through receiving what someone else has earned for us. But we grow in sanctification through living out what someone else has earned for us. Both are gifts we inherit from someone else, but the former is passively received and the second is actively pursued. If I were a pauper who had some benefactor deposit one billion dollars in my bank account, I would be regarded a billionaire; but there would be the need to share this new wealth

with friends living on the street. The gift was received passively, but in turn it was put to use for good actively.

If sanctification is confused with justification, it will lose the tension, reality, and rigor necessary for the battles of the Christian life; if justification is confused with sanctification, the product will be of no redemptive value.

Therefore, let us distinguish conversion from justification and realize that initial conversion is a passive reception of God's gracious acceptance of us in Christ, while the life-long conversion process is an active pursuit of holiness and righteousness, the very thing which the gospel promises that we already possess fully and completely in Christ.

In conclusion, let us meditate on the wonderful promise that in Christ we possess all of his riches, not just one or two of them. Do we try to imitate him? Yes! not merely as our moral example, the way Greek sailors may have venerated Neptune or Greek philosophers venerated Aristotle's ethics, but as our indwelling Head. As the little brother stands in awe of his elder sibling, let us imitate our Elder Brother because of the fact that through his incarnation, death, resurrection, ascension, and mediation, we are flesh of his flesh and bone of his bone. For "Both the one who makes men holy and those who are made holy are of the same family" (Heb.2:11).

The call to the converted, therefore, is not, "Come to Christ; only he can give you the power to live the abundant Christian life!" Rather, it is, "Come to Christ; only he can be your abundance," as the Father has only "blessed us with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places in Christ" (Eph.1:3).

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