

Study SIX

CALLED TO UNION WITH CHRIST

Paul said that the Romans were called to belong to Jesus Christ (Rom. 1:6), and the Corinthians into the fellowship of the Son (I Corin. 1:9). The basis of all God's dealings with his people is that they are in Christ. In him they are blessed, chosen, destined to be sons, given grace, shown the eternal purpose of God, appointed to live for God's glory, and sealed with the Holy Spirit. (Eph. 1:3–14). In him, they are brought to life and seated in heavenly places awaiting the full revelation of God's grace. They are the workmanship of God, created for good works, made members of a covenant of peace (Eph. 2:4–14).

We will seek to understand what it means for man to be in Christ, and what it means for the whole world that this is the sole means whereby God relates to his creation.

CHRIST HAS IDENTIFIED WITH MANKIND

The union of any person with Christ is not based firstly on the action of man. That would be presumption. But Christ has in every essential respect been made like his 'brethren', and he identified with man in his whole life (Heb. 2:5–18). he shared their flesh and blood—the likeness of sinful flesh (Rom. 8:3). He entered into their function as managers of creation (Heb. 2:8f.). In his life time he became known as the friend of publicans and sinners. He endured the same temptations as all other humans (cf. Isa. 63:9; II Corin. 8:9). He suffered with them and bore their death. In that sense he has the same origin as man and is not ashamed to call them brethren. he died for Israel and all the scattered children of God (John 11:51f.), perfecting for all time, those set apart (Heb. 10:14).

CHRIST IS FOR ALL

The identification of Jesus with humanity is not just one of friendship. He is described as the representative of the whole race. (Rom. 5:12–21).

All humanity has one origin in Adam (Acts 17:26). The destiny of all men was in him and was lost. He was not merely an example of, nor simply the cause of all men's failure, but a revelation of all men's failure. As Adam, under ideal circumstances failed, it was the demonstration and acknowledgment of all man's rebellion.

Adam prefigures Christ who is Head of the new humanity. He represents all mankind and what he does is determinative for all mankind. Paul said one had died for all—therefore all had died, and that therefore he could regard no one from a merely human view-point any longer. (II Corin. 5:14–16). He is not saying that all are Christians but that there is a new basis (other than Adam) whereby all humanity is regarded. He is the stone around which the building of humanity will be erected (Ps. 118:22; Luke 20:17f.). Those rejecting that,

shall fall and be broken by it (Isa. 8:13–15; I Pet. 2:4–8), because there is no other name given whereby man may be saved (Acts 4:11).

So none will be judged in Adam, but in Christ. He is the new head of humanity. All judgement will be by him (John 5:22,27; Acts 17:31; Rom. 2:16). Those who believe in Christ and so are in Christ are recognising now what all will ultimately see to be true, at the resurrection (John 5:24–30; I Corin. 15:23–25).

UNITED BY FAITH

The unity of all men with Adam was natural, but the union of men with Christ is by faith. That is, Christ's identification with man must be received by faith. (Eph. 2:3–8). Jesus said that those who would eat his flesh and drink his blood would abide in him and he in them (John 6:56), and this truth is portrayed in the communion feast (I Corin. 10:16). Christ is in men's hearts by faith (Eph. 3:17) and they are made alive together, with Christ, through faith in the working of God. (Col. 2:14).

Something of what this means in personal terms may be seen in the experience of Old Testament saints. David writes: 'Preserve me, O, God, for in thee I take refuge. I have no good apart from thee.' (Ps. 16:1–2 Also cf. 17:14; and see Ps. 18:1–2).

Jonathan Edwards said, 'Faith is the soul's active uniting with Christ'.

JUSTIFICATION IN CHRIST

If Jesus Christ has identified with mankind and believing man grasps hold of that by faith, and so is in Christ, we may now trace the operations that take place on his behalf and how they become true in him.

Jesus was crucified and buried, and rose from death, for mankind, so for those who are in Christ, these things have taken place for them. They are crucified with Christ, buried with Christ, raised with Christ (Rom. 6:4,6; Gal. 2:19; Eph. 2:6; Col. 2:12, 3:1) and they live with him, unto God (II Corin. 7:3). The crucifixion of Jesus meant his death to sin. It could have no more power over him to condemn him (Rom. 6:7). He condemned sin in the flesh (Rom. 8:2), by exhausting its legal penalty. So man who is in Christ is dead to sin in the same way that he was at his resurrection; freed of the penalty of sin, with all of the power that exerts over fallen man. (John Stott in 'Men Made New' makes it clear that Jesus did not die to the moral power of sin, because he was never alive to it.) So he who has died (in Christ) is freed, or actually justified from sin (Rom. 6:7 and Acts 13:39).

Jesus also died to the law because law fulfilled its total requirement on him as the sin-bearer. So the believer who is in Christ is dead to the law as a condemning agent in his life (Rom. 7:4; 8:1).

As Christ was raised, to live to God, the believer is raised with him and so is alive to God (Rom. 6:10f.; Gal. 2:19). He is made alive together with Christ

(Eph. 2:5). In this sense, being alive in Jesus Christ parallels the new birth (John 3:5; James 1:18; I Pet. 1:23). Also in Galatians. 2:20f., dying with Christ, being indwelt by Christ, living by faith in the Son of God, and being justified are all seen together as one thing.

Incredible as it may sound, union with Christ means that Christ was made to be sin, so that believers can become the righteousness of God (I Corin. 1:30; II Corin. 5:21; Phil. 3:8f.). Union with Christ means that just as Christ identified (by baptism) with all that fallen man had become (Luke 3:3, 21) and bore its logical consequences, so the believer identifies (by baptism) with all that Christ has won by his dying and rising, and inherits all its benefits (Rom. 6:3f.).

It is a principle of all creation that life arises out of death (John 12:24). However, our death could not lead to life because the seed would be dead before planting, and our death would simply be a deserved judgement with no future. But if Christ, bearing our sin, dies, and rises, he, as our representative Head, brings justification to us.

HOLINESS IN CHRIST

The Christian's growth in holiness may be contrasted with the Eastern religious notion of death to the fleshly self as the end of the merely human and the beginning of the divine life. This makes entry into the divine dependent on Man's death to the flesh. The believer's entry to life, however, is dependent on the death and resurrection of Christ on his behalf (Gal. 2:20; Phil. 3:10). In the power of a given righteousness, which his sinning cannot touch, he can put to death the deeds of the body and live. (Rom. 8:13; also Rom. 6:12–23) Being alive to God, he can mortify the flesh (Col. 3:5; also 1–17). His constant failures—of reversion to the flesh—are covered, so his experience constantly arises from a secure status; not from self-justifications, regrets, or penances, but from love. All of his life is an outgrowth of Christ's dying and rising for him. In a grateful and reflective way he enters into Christ's victory and lives his life, and is transformed by the renewing of his mind (Rom. 12:1–2).

Such a person fulfils the law (Rom. 8:3f.) and does not sin (that is habitually and willingly) because God's nature abides in him (I John 3:1–10; also II Pet. 1:4). He is born of God, and the One born of God keeps him (I John 5:18).

NATURE OF THE UNION

In many places, Christ is said to be in the believer (eg. II Corin. 13:4,5; Eph. 3:17) and the believer in Christ (eg. Eph. 1). The meaning of these facts is portrayed both by relation to the Trinity, and by comparison with a number of understood inter-relationships.

Jesus said he was in the Father and the Father in him so people seeing him would have seen the Father (John 14:9f.). In the same context he said that the disciples would come to know that he was in his Father and that they

were in him and he in them. Clearly the union is a union of relationship and action where one never comes to be the other, but where the identity and actions of the one become operative in the other.

If the Father is in the Son and the Son in the believer, then the Father and Son have their home in him. (John 14:23; cf. I John 1:3, 4:16).

Though this union is inward and hidden it has very powerful and observable effects. Jesus prayed that believers would be in the Father and himself, just as the Father was in him and he in the Father, so that the world would believe that the Father had sent the Son, and loved the church as he loved the Son. (John 17:20–26).

Just as the Son's whole life flows from the Father, so the believer lives because of the Son (John 6:57). Each believer lives in the relationship which Jesus has with his Father. he is loved with the same love (John 17:23, and heard in his praying as Christ would be heard (John 16:26f.). Christ and the believer share one God and one Father—as brethren (John 20:17).

So the meaning of being in Christ is not so much mystical as relational, and readily enjoyed by every believer.

Various familiar inter-relationships are used to portray this union.

(a) Bride Groom and Bride

The church, having died with Christ, is freed from the law and eligible to marry another (Rom. 7:1–4). This bridegroom is Christ, who sanctified and cleansed the church to present her to himself as a pure bride, (Eph. 5:25–27) and nourishes and cherishes her as a man does his own flesh (5:28–31).

This union has its roots in the relation of God to Israel in the Old Testament (Isaiah 54:5–8) which reveals the closeness of relationship that God has always sought with his people (Isa. 63:9 – 'In all their affliction he was afflicted'. See also the Song of Solomon; Jer. 3:20; Hosea 2:2–5).

The apostle consciously sought to bring people into this close relation with Christ and warned them against straying from a sincere and pure devotion to Christ (II Corin. 11:2).

While this relationship of bride and groom is a present enjoyment, it waits fulfilment at the marriage supper of the Lamb (Rev. 19:7), and so the bride waits eagerly (Rev 22:17).

(b) Head and Body

Christ is the head of the church, as his body, and so the whole church grows with a growth which is from God (Col. 1:18, 2:19). For this position Christ has been given all authority so that he is pre-eminent not only over the church, but over all things for the church (Eph. 1:22f.).

The church relates all things therefore to its head, but in so doing is dependent not only on the head, but all other members of the body (Eph.

4:15f.). So union with Christ must of necessity be lived out in community with others. (I Corin. 10:17, 12:12–27; Eph. 2:15; I John 1:3). This ensures the unity of redeemed humanity now (Eph. 4:3–6) and is the assurance of the ultimate unity of all things (Eph. 1:10).

A believer may not pollute his life with immorality—his body is a member of Christ. This, together with the reference to the body as a temple of the Holy Spirit, reveals that the believer's union with Christ is not mystical but incorporates his whole life as lived out in flesh. It is interesting that in this fleshly context, Paul talks about being one spirit with the Lord (I Corin. 6:15–20; i.e., the spirit of man is never a disembodied spirit. This passage brings together the bodily union and the marriage union).

(c) Vine and Branches

Jesus taught the union of himself with believers in agricultural terms. Jesus himself is the vine and believers are branches. That is, they are incorporated in the vine, though without losing their identity because unfruitful branches are pruned off. The life of the branch is the life of the vine and because of this, the branch bears fruit, which is what the Father seeks from the union.

Practically, the believer abides in Christ by obeying the words of Christ, and abiding in his love (John 15:1–11).

Paul also uses this imagery when he says that believers are planted together with Christ in a death and resurrection like his (Rom. 6:5, that Gentiles may be grafted into the olive tree (Israel) or Jews grafted back into their own stock (Rom. 11:17, 24), and that we are to live in Christ, rooted . . . in him and established in the faith (Col. 2:6f.).

(d) Corner-stone and Building

Christ is the corner stone of the Church, the apostles and prophets completing that foundation, on which the whole church is built as a dwelling place for God (Ps. 118:22; Isa. 28:16; Eph. 2:20–22; Col. 2:7).

Each of these relationships is such that the parties or units never becomes independent of one another. A student may outgrow his dependence on his teacher, and a child leave the home of its parent, but a bride and groom grow in dependence on one another, vine and branches consist in being together, head and body live by their union with each other and the building is secure on its foundation. Therefore it is conveyed that a Christian's union with Christ is not simply the place of his starting but the whole basis of his living. (so, I John 2:6, 24, 28).

The union of believers with Christ unites them in affection (II Corin. 5:15), in thought (I Corin. 2:16), in life (Gal. 2:20), and in spirit (I Corin. 6:17–20). This must surely constitute fullness of life (Col. 2:10) which Jesus came to bring (John 1:16). Such inter-relationship with Christ may not be dissolved (John 10:28, Rom. 8:35,39; I Thess. 4:14–17). It makes Paul say that for him to live is Christ and to die, gain (Phil. 1:21). The purposes of Christ and those who are united with him are that inter-twined that to reject one is to reject both (Luke 10:16; cf. I Sam. 8:7). They suffer together (Rom. 8:17; Phil. 3:10; Col. 1:24; I Pet. 4:13) in anticipation of a victory that is to be shared.

Such union never means that the believer's personality is absorbed. Christ is always the head and the believers always the body. Their wills are theirs always, to make them always his. Nor can this union be mediated formally or sacramentally by the church. It is dynamic and personal.

KNOWLEDGE OF THIS UNION BY THE SPIRIT

Jesus said that when the Spirit came to be in his disciples, they would know that they were in him and he in them (John 14:16–20). So all understanding of union with Christ, is conveyed by the Spirit from within (I Corin. 2:10–13). The Spirit is called the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus, because it is by him and by walking in him, or setting the mind of the things of the Spirit, that the union with Christ is realised and enjoyed (Rom. 8:1–11).

John says that believers know they are in Christ and Christ in them because they have been given the Spirit (I John 4:13), and so have understanding (5:20).

FULL AWARENESS OF UNION STILL TO COME

Complete enjoyment of this union of spirits is at present beyond man's reach (Eph. 5:32; Col. 1:27) as, in fact, is true of all relationships. But Paul says that Christ being in believers is the hope of glory (Col. 1:27). He said their life is hid with Christ in God, but that when he appears, they would appear with him in glory (3:3f.). Jesus said very simply that where he was his disciples would be also (John 14:3; and I Thess. 4:17).

The resurrection of the body is the direct result of union with Christ (Rom. 8:10f.; I Corin. 15:20–23, 45–29; Eph. 1:18ff., 21; II Tim. 2:11). Then the full intention and scope of Christ's union with believers will become apparent.