

FAITHFUL TO THE WORD

Systematic Theology Series

SOTERIOLOGY

The Doctrine of Salvation

By Grace Alone, Through Faith Alone, In Christ Alone, To the Glory of God Alone

UNIT 3: UNION WITH CHRIST

The Ground of All Saving Benefits

Lesson 8

In Christ

The Most Important Phrase in the New Testament

The Believer's Mystical, Legal, and Vital Union with the Savior

“So long as Christ remains outside of us... all that he has suffered and done... remains useless and of no value for us” — Calvin

Key Texts: Ephesians 1:3–14; Romans 6:1–11; Galatians 2:20; John 15:1–11; Colossians 3:1–4; 1 Corinthians 1:30

“I have been crucified with Christ; and it is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me; and the life which I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave Himself up for me.”

Galatians 2:20, NASB 1995

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Introduction

With Lesson 8, this Soteriology series enters its third unit, and does so by arriving at what many of the greatest theologians in the history of the church have identified as the single most important organizing concept in the whole of New Testament soteriology. We have traced the eternal foundation of salvation: the *pactum salutis* in which the triune God covenanted before the world was made; the unconditional election in which the Father chose a specific people in Christ; the sobering reality of reprobation; and the missionary implications of sovereign grace. We have now arrived at the question that all of those eternal realities are ultimately pressing toward: how do the benefits secured in eternity and accomplished in history actually reach the individual sinner and become personally his own? The answer that this series will spend the next two lessons developing is union with Christ, the spiritual, legal, vital, and mystical bond by which the believer is joined to Christ and receives, in that union, every saving benefit that the Father planned, the Son purchased, and the Spirit applies.

The phrase “in Christ”, together with its equivalents “in Him,” “in the Lord,” and “with Christ”, appears in Paul’s letters with a frequency that is, on any account, astonishing. Scholars count more than 160 occurrences of the *en Christō* formula and its variants across the Pauline corpus. No other phrase appears with anything approaching this frequency; no other relationship is presupposed with anything approaching this consistency. Paul blesses God for spiritual blessings “in Christ” (Ephesians 1:3); he declares that believers were chosen “in Him” before the foundation of the world (Ephesians 1:4); he grounds justification “in Christ” (Galatians 2:17); he locates the resurrection hope “in Christ” (1 Corinthians 15:22); he anchors the assurance of no condemnation “in Christ Jesus” (Romans 8:1); and he declares that every promise of God finds its “yes” “in Him” (2 Corinthians 1:20). The cumulative weight of this usage is unmistakable: union with Christ is not one Pauline theme among many. It is the sphere, the ground, and the organizing center of the entire apostolic account of salvation.

John Calvin, whose theological instincts were, in many ways, the most perfectly calibrated in the history of Reformed thought, articulated the significance of this with characteristic precision in the *Institutes*: “So long as Christ remains outside of us, and we are separated from him, all that he has suffered and done for the salvation of the human race remains useless and of no value for us. Therefore, to share with us what he has received from the Father, he had to become ours and to dwell within us” (*Institutes* III.1.1). Calvin’s point is both logically compelling and pastorally urgent: the atonement accomplished in history does not automatically become the possession of every sinner for whom it was designed; it becomes the sinner’s own only as he is united to the One who accomplished it. Christ and all His benefits are given together, or not at all. You cannot have His forgiveness without having Him. You cannot have His righteousness without having Him. You cannot have His life without having Him. Union with Christ is not a supplement to the gospel; it is the structural reality within which the gospel is received and every saving benefit appropriated.

This lesson will develop the doctrine of union with Christ across six major sections: the definition and theological significance of the union; the four dimensions of the union (federal, mystical, vital, and experiential); the union in its participation in Christ’s death; the union in its participation in Christ’s resurrection and ascension; the union in the ongoing life of Christ in the believer; and the pastoral significance of the whole doctrine as the organizing center of the Christian life. The governing conviction throughout is Calvin’s own: everything the believer has, she has in Christ; everything the believer lacks, she lacks because she has not yet fully received what union with Christ

has made available to her; and the whole of the Christian life is the progressive and increasingly conscious inhabitation of the inexhaustible riches that are hers in the One to whom she is inseparably joined.

A note on the placement of this lesson within the series is worth making explicit. Union with Christ, in the systematic ordering of the Reformed tradition, occupies a unique position in the *ordo salutis*: it is not simply one element in the sequence alongside regeneration, faith, justification, and the rest. Rather, it is the meta-category within which all of those elements find their proper relation. Justification and sanctification, for Calvin, are not two independent divine acts that happen to be directed toward the same person; they are the *duplex gratia*, the double grace, of the single union with Christ, the two dimensions of the one saving relationship that the Spirit establishes between the believer and the Savior. Understanding union with Christ is therefore not merely understanding one doctrine; it is understanding the framework within which every subsequent doctrine of the *ordo salutis* will be properly located, properly related to the others, and properly received as the gift of the God who gives not benefits without the Benefactor, but the Benefactor who brings all benefits with Him.

I. Union with Christ Defined

The Bond That Makes Every Saving Benefit Personally Ours

A. *Definition and Theological Significance*

Union with Christ may be defined as the real, spiritual, vital, and indissoluble bond by which the Holy Spirit joins the believing sinner to the person of the risen Lord Jesus Christ, so that the believer participates in Christ and all His saving benefits, not merely the benefits of His work applied externally to her account, but a genuine personal union with the One who is the source of all saving good. It is not merely a legal fiction, in which the sinner is treated as if she were connected to Christ without any real change in her actual condition. It is not merely a moral influence, in which Christ's example and teaching gradually reform the sinner's character from the outside. It is a real union, real because it is grounded in the actual work of the Holy Spirit, vital because it produces genuine spiritual life in the one who is joined, personal because it unites a specific believer to a specific Savior, and indissoluble because it rests on the same sovereign grace that elected, called, and will certainly glorify.

The theological significance of this definition lies in what it implies about the relationship between Christ and His benefits. In popular Christianity, salvation is often conceived primarily as the reception of benefits, forgiveness, eternal life, peace with God, with Christ functioning essentially as the mechanism by which those benefits are procured and dispensed. On this view, the primary question of the gospel is: how can I receive these benefits? And the answer is: by meeting the required condition (faith, repentance, commitment). The doctrine of union with Christ fundamentally reorients this conception: the primary benefit of the gospel is not a set of spiritual goods that Christ makes available to the appropriately qualified recipient; the primary benefit of the gospel is Christ Himself, and all other benefits are given with Him and in Him and through Him, because they cannot be had apart from Him. As Calvin puts it: "We see that our whole salvation and all its parts are comprehended in Christ" (Institutes II.16.19). The benefits are inseparable from the Benefactor.

This has profound implications for how the Christian life is understood. The believer who conceives of salvation as the reception of benefits from Christ, who thinks of herself as a recipient of divine goods that are administered to her account through a transactional relationship with a somewhat distant Savior, will inevitably experience the Christian life as a series of transactions: confessing sins, receiving forgiveness, performing religious duties, receiving blessing. The believer who has understood that she is united to Christ, that His death is her death, His resurrection is her resurrection, His righteousness is her righteousness, His life is her life, and His access to the Father is her access, will experience the Christian life as the progressive discovery and inhabitation of a relationship that is already, in its deepest structure, complete. The difference is between a religion of transactions and a relationship of union, and the difference is total.

The Reformed tradition has insisted that union with Christ is the organizing center of the entire *ordo salutis* precisely because it prevents the various elements of the *ordo* from being understood as independent transactions. Justification is not a divine act directed at the isolated sinner; it is the forensic dimension of what it means to be united to the One who is the Lord our righteousness (Jeremiah 23:6). Sanctification is not a divine project of moral improvement directed at the isolated sinner; it is the vital transformation that flows from the life of the vine into the branches (John 15:1–5). Adoption is not a status conferred on the isolated sinner; it is the filial

relationship that belongs to those who are united to the eternal Son and therefore, in Him, made sons and daughters of the Father (Romans 8:14–17). Every element of the *ordo* is the expression of a particular dimension of the one union with Christ, and the union is the ground from which they all flow.

B. The “In Christ” Formula in Paul

The linguistic evidence for the centrality of union with Christ in Pauline theology is itself compelling. The phrase *en Christō* (in Christ) and its variants (*en autō*, in Him; *en tō kuriō*, in the Lord; *syn Christō*, with Christ) appear in Paul’s letters with a frequency that has no parallel in any other New Testament author and no close parallel in the Greek literature of Paul’s world. Scholars have proposed various translations for the formula, it may indicate location (being spatially located “in” Christ), instrumentality (through the agency of Christ), or identification (being identified with Christ as one’s representative), and the range of proposed interpretations reflects the range of theological relationships the formula expresses in its various contexts.

What is clear from the cumulative weight of the Pauline usage is that “in Christ” is not a single, fixed, technical term with one precisely defined meaning but a multi-dimensional formula that captures the whole range of the believer’s relationship to the person of Christ, legal, vital, spatial, temporal, and eschatological. In Ephesians 1:3–14, the formula appears seven times in twelve verses and encompasses election before the foundation of the world, redemption through the blood of Christ, the forgiveness of trespasses, the revelation of the mystery of God’s will, the inheritance of God’s people, and the sealing of the Spirit, the entire sweep of the divine saving purpose from eternity to eternity, all located “in Him.” In Romans 8:1, “there is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus”, the union with Christ is the ground of the most comprehensive and unqualified declaration of freedom from condemnation in the New Testament. In 1 Corinthians 1:30, “By His doing you are in Christ Jesus, who became to us wisdom from God, and righteousness and sanctification, and redemption”, the union is the source of every saving benefit, and even the union itself is “by His doing,” grounded in sovereign divine grace rather than human achievement.

The phrase “in Christ” also carries a specifically corporate dimension that distinguishes it from a merely individualistic account of personal piety. When Paul says that believers are “one body in Christ” (Romans 12:5), that they have been “baptized into one body” (1 Corinthians 12:13), and that “there is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free man, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus” (Galatians 3:28, NASB 1995), he is describing a corporate union in which the individual’s relationship to Christ necessarily entails a relationship to all others who are in Christ. To be united to the Head is to be joined to the body; to be joined to the body is to be in communion with all the members. Union with Christ is therefore both the most intensely personal relationship a human being can have and the most radically communal, because the Christ to whom the individual is united is the Christ who is Head of the whole church.

II. The Four Dimensions of Union with Christ

Federal, Mystical, Vital, and Experiential

A. Federal and Representational Union

The first and, in some respects, foundational dimension of union with Christ is the federal or representational union: Christ as the believer's covenant head, whose obedience and death are legally credited to the believer's account by virtue of his representative standing. This dimension of the union is rooted in the Pauline contrast between Adam and Christ in Romans 5:12–21 and 1 Corinthians 15:21–22, 45–49. In these passages, Paul presents Adam and Christ as the two federal heads of the human race: Adam is the first Adam, whose sin brought condemnation and death to all who are in him by natural generation; Christ is the last Adam, whose obedience brings justification and life to all who are in Him by regeneration and faith. The federal union with Christ parallels, and reverses, the federal union with Adam.

The federal union with Christ is the dimension of the union that grounds the doctrine of justification: the believer is justified because she is legally united to the One whose perfect obedience is credited to her account. This is the famous double imputation: the believer's sin is imputed to Christ (so that He bore its penalty in His death), and Christ's righteousness is imputed to the believer (so that she stands before God in His perfect righteousness rather than in her own inadequate performance). The federal union is, in this sense, an external union, it is a legal relationship of representation and imputation that does not require any particular subjective experience in the believer for its reality. Just as the sinner did not need to have any subjective experience of being in Adam for Adam's sin to be imputed to her, the believer does not need to feel the full weight of her union with Christ for Christ's righteousness to be credited to her account. The federal union is an objective, legal, covenantal reality.

The federal dimension of the union is also the dimension that most directly bears on the question of the extent of the atonement. Christ died as the covenant head of a specific people given to Him by the Father in the *pactum salutis*; His death as their representative was the discharge of the specific debt they owed, not a general payment that might or might not be applied to any given individual. The federal union established in eternity (the Father giving a specific people to the Son) and executed in history (the Son bearing the specific penalty of the specific sins of the specific people given to Him) is the ground of the definite character of the atonement and the certainty of its effectual application to all for whom it was made.

B. Mystical and Spiritual Union

The second dimension of union with Christ is the mystical or spiritual union: the real but invisible bond established by the Holy Spirit between the believer's person and the risen person of Christ, by which the believer genuinely participates in Christ and not merely in the legal benefits of His work. The word "mystical" here does not connote irrationality or incoherence; it connotes the reality of a genuine connection that is not perceptible to the physical senses and is not fully explainable in ordinary relational categories. The union is real, the believer genuinely participates in Christ, but it is spiritual in nature, established by the Spirit's sovereign work rather than by any observable physical or psychological mechanism.

The most extended biblical exploration of the mystical union is found in John 14–17, particularly in the Farewell Discourse's mutual indwelling language. In John 14:20, Jesus declares: "In that day you will know that I am in My Father, and you in Me, and I in you" (NASB 1995). The structure of the mutual indwelling is striking: the Son is in the Father, the believer is in the Son, and the Son is in the believer. The union between Christ and the believer participates in and is patterned after the union between the Son and the Father, not identical with it (the believer does not become divine), but genuinely analogous to it in its character of intimate, real, personal indwelling. In John 17:21–23, Jesus prays that the disciples would be one as the Father and Son are one, and that they would be in the Father and the Son as the Father and Son are in each other. This is the highest expression of the mystical

union in the entire New Testament: a participation in the Trinitarian life that is the ultimate goal of the believer's union with Christ.

Ephesians 5:31–32 provides Paul's own characterization of the mystical union: applying the language of Genesis 2:24 ("the two shall become one flesh") to the relationship between Christ and the church, Paul declares: "This mystery is great; but I am speaking with reference to Christ and the church." The marriage union, the most intimate of all human relationships, involving a genuine one-fleshness that is real and not merely metaphorical, is the New Testament's closest human analogy to the union between Christ and the church. And Paul calls it a "mega mystery": a disclosure of a divine purpose hidden from ages and generations and now revealed, which reaches its ultimate expression not in human marriage but in the union between the Savior and His people that human marriage is designed to image. The mystical union exceeds the categories of ordinary human relationship, which is precisely why it requires the specifically analogical language of marriage to describe it and why even that analogy falls short of the full reality.

C. Vital and Organic Union

The third dimension of union with Christ is the vital or organic union: the living, dynamic connection between Christ and the believer through which the life and power of Christ actually flow into and through the believer, producing the genuine spiritual vitality, growth, and fruitfulness that are the marks of the Christian life. This dimension of the union is most fully expressed in Jesus' own teaching in John 15:1–8, the vine and branches discourse: "I am the true vine, and My Father is the vinedresser. Every branch in Me that does not bear fruit, He takes away; and every branch that bears fruit, He prunes it so that it may bear more fruit... I am the vine, you are the branches; he who abides in Me and I in him, he bears much fruit, for apart from Me you can do nothing" (vv. 1–2, 5, NASB 1995).

The vine and branches image is particularly illuminating because it captures both the organic character of the union (the branch does not merely receive instructions from the vine; it receives life, nourishment, and productive capacity from the vine's own living substance) and the indispensable necessity of the union (apart from the vine, the branch can do nothing; severed from its source of life, it withers and dies). The believer's fruitfulness is not the product of her own spiritual discipline applied independently of her relationship to Christ; it is the organic expression of the life that flows from the vine into the branches. This does not eliminate the branch's genuine activity, the branches do not produce fruit passively; they bear fruit by the life they receive, but it locates the source of all genuine spiritual productivity in the life of the vine rather than in the effort of the branch.

The vital union is also the dimension of the union that most directly bears on the doctrine of sanctification. Sanctification is not the moral improvement of a person who is receiving instructions from a distant Master; it is the organic transformation of a person who is receiving life from an indwelling Savior. The imperative of Colossians 3:1–4, "Keep seeking the things above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God", is grounded in the indicative of verses 1 and 3: "If you have been raised up with Christ" and "Your life is hidden with Christ in God." The command to live a certain way flows from the reality of being in a certain union. The sanctified life is not what the believer does to become worthy of Christ; it is the outward expression of the life that Christ is already producing in her through the vital connection of the union.

D. Experiential Union

The fourth dimension of union with Christ is the experiential union: the believer's conscious, personal, and growing participation in the story of Christ, His death, His resurrection, His ascension, and His life, through the ongoing work of the Spirit who applies the benefits of Christ's accomplished redemption to the believing soul. The experiential union is the subjective, personal dimension of what the federal, mystical, and vital unions describe objectively: it is the believer's actual lived experience of being united to Christ, expressed in the patterns of dying and rising that characterize the Christian life.

Galatians 2:20 is the New Testament's most personal and most concentrated expression of the experiential union: "I have been crucified with Christ; and it is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me; and the life which I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave Himself up for me" (NASB 1995). The verse moves through three extraordinary claims in rapid succession. First, a past death: "I have been crucified with Christ." The perfect tense of the verb (*sunestaurōmai*) indicates a completed event with ongoing effects: Paul was crucified with Christ at the cross, and the effect of that death continues in the present as the old self no longer governs his existence. Second, a present life: "It is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me." The old Paul, the autonomous self-directing life of the pre-conversion person, has been displaced by the life of Christ Himself, who now inhabits and animates the believer's existence. Third, a present faith: "The life which I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God." The new life is not the dissolution of Paul's personal existence but its reorientation around the Son of God who loved him and gave Himself for him. The experiential union is the daily reality of living from within that reorientation.

III. Union with Christ in His Death

Dying with Him That We Might Live with Him

A. Romans 6:1–11, The Death That Changes Everything

The most extended and exegetically rich treatment of the believer's union with Christ in His death is Romans 6:1–11, which Paul introduces as the answer to the antinomian objection that the doctrine of grace encourages sin: "What shall we say then? Are we to continue in sin so that grace may increase? May it never be!" (vv. 1–2, NASB 1995). Paul's response is not to qualify his doctrine of grace or to introduce a moral supplement to it; it is to invoke the union with Christ in death as the definitive answer. The reason a justified person cannot continue in sin is not that sin would jeopardize her justification; it is that she has died to sin through her union with Christ's death, and death is the most decisive change a person can undergo. "How shall we who died to sin still live in it?" (v. 2, NASB 1995). The rhetorical question presupposes the absurdity of the suggestion: a dead person cannot live in the element from which her death has separated her.

The mechanism of this death is baptism into Christ's death: "Or do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus have been baptized into His death? Therefore we have been buried with Him through baptism into death, so that as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life" (vv. 3–4, NASB 1995). The baptism here is not merely the water rite but the spiritual reality that the water rite signifies, the Spirit's union of the believer with Christ in His death and resurrection, the participation in the saving events of Christ's history that makes those events genuinely and personally the believer's own. The believer was not physically present at the crucifixion; yet, through the union that the Spirit

establishes, the crucifixion was her death as much as it was Christ's. She died in Him, and the death she died in Him is a real death, not merely a metaphor, not merely a moral resolution, from which the same power that raised Christ will raise her to newness of life.

Verses 5–7 develop the logic of this union with great care: “For if we have become united with Him in the likeness of His death, certainly we shall also be in the likeness of His resurrection, knowing this, that our old self was crucified with Him, in order that our body of sin might be done away with, so that we would no longer be slaves to sin; for he who has died is freed from sin” (NASB 1995). The argument from verse 7, “for he who has died is freed from sin”, is a legal principle: death discharges all obligations. The believer who died in Christ has been legally discharged from the claim that sin once had upon her. Sin's dominion depended on its ownership; and the one who has died in Christ belongs to sin no more, because the death she died in Him broke sin's claim upon her. This is not an argument that the believer no longer commits sins; it is an argument that sin no longer has legal dominion over her. She is free, not merely potentially free if she performs certain spiritual disciplines, but actually and objectively free, as a matter of what happened to her in Christ's death.

Verse 11 draws the practical conclusion that the entire passage has been building toward: “Even so consider yourselves to be dead to sin, but alive to God in Christ Jesus” (NASB 1995). The verb “consider” (*logizomai*) is a reckoning term, the same term used for the imputation of righteousness in Romans 4. Paul is not asking the believer to pretend that she is dead to sin or to work up a psychological sense of death to sin; he is asking her to reckon as true what is actually true by virtue of her union with Christ. The death to sin and the life to God are already the objective reality of her existence in Christ; the imperative is to live from within that reality by consciously and persistently reckoning it as the true account of what she is and has. This is the logic of the entire Christian life: not striving to become what she is not, but living out what she already is in Christ.

B. *The Death to the Law and the Death to the Self*

Union with Christ in His death encompasses not only the death to sin's dominion (Romans 6) but also the death to the law's condemning power (Romans 7:1–6; Galatians 2:19–20) and the death of the old self with its autonomy and self-directedness (Colossians 3:3–5; Galatians 5:24). In Romans 7:1–6, Paul argues from the marriage law that death releases a person from the binding obligation of the law: “You also were made to die to the Law through the body of Christ, so that you might be joined to another, to Him who was raised from the dead, in order that we might bear fruit for God” (v. 4, NASB 1995). The union with Christ in His death has freed the believer from the law's condemning claim, not by nullifying the law but by satisfying its demands through the One who bore its full penalty in His death. The believer is not under law but under grace (Romans 6:14), not because the law's demands have been set aside, but because they have been fully met in the One to whom she is united.

In Galatians 2:19, Paul describes his own experience of this freedom with a compressed theological density that rewards sustained meditation: “For through the Law I died to the Law, so that I might live to God.” The law itself, with its relentless exposure of sin and its pronouncement of condemnation over the sinner who cannot meet its demands, was the instrument that drove Paul to Christ. Having died to the law through union with Christ, he is now free to live to God in a way that the law-observant Paul never could, because the life he now lives is not his own independent moral effort but the life of Christ living in him (Galatians 2:20). The death that union with Christ brings is therefore not a loss but a liberation: the liberation of the soul from the exhausting tyranny of self-achieved righteousness into the freedom of a life that is lived from within the inexhaustible righteousness of Another.

IV. Union with Christ in His Resurrection and Ascension

Raised and Seated with Him in the Heavenly Places

A. *Raised with Christ, Ephesians 2:5–6 and Colossians 3:1*

If union with Christ in His death means that the believer has genuinely died, that the old self, the enslaved self, the condemned self, the self under the law's curse, is no more, then union with Christ in His resurrection means that the believer has genuinely been raised to a new life whose character is determined entirely by the life of the risen One. This is not merely a future hope (though it includes a future hope, as Romans 6:5 and 1 Corinthians 15 make clear); it is a present reality. Paul writes in Ephesians 2:5–6: “Even when we were dead in our transgressions, [God] 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” (NASB 1995). All three verbs, made alive, raised, seated, are in the aorist tense, referring to completed past acts, and all three are compound verbs prefixed with *syn* (with/together): *suzōopoieō*, *synegeiro*, *synkathizō*. The believer was made alive with Christ, raised with Christ, and seated with Christ.

The present-tense implications of this past-tense reality are drawn out in Colossians 3:1–4: “If you have been raised up with Christ, keep seeking the things above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. Set your mind on the things above, not on the things that are on earth. For you have died and your life is hidden with Christ in God. When Christ, who is our life, is revealed, then you also will be revealed with Him in glory” (NASB 1995). The present command (“keep seeking the things above”) is grounded in the past reality (“you have been raised up with Christ”) and the present state (“your life is hidden with Christ in God”). The believer's life, her deepest, truest, most essential life, is not the life that is visible in the present age; it is the life that is hidden with Christ in God, which will be revealed in its full glory only when Christ Himself is revealed. The Christian life is, in this sense, an eschatological existence: a life that belongs already to the new age, even as it is lived out in the conditions of the old.

The resurrection union has profound implications for the believer's self-understanding. The person she was before conversion, with her particular patterns of sin, her characteristic weaknesses, her ingrained habits of self-assertion and self-protection, is not the truest account of who she is. The truest account of who she is, is the account given by her union with the risen Christ: she is a new creation (2 Corinthians 5:17), a person whose life is hidden with Christ in God, a person who belongs already to the resurrection age even as she awaits its full manifestation. This is not a denial of the reality of present struggle with sin and weakness; it is the establishment of an identity that is more fundamental than that struggle and from which the battle against sin is to be fought. The Christian does not fight sin from the position of a person who is trying to become a new creation; she fights sin from the position of a person who already is a new creation, in Christ, and who is learning to live out of that reality.

B. *Seated with Him in the Heavenly Places*

The third element of the believer's union with Christ in His saving history is perhaps the most astonishing of the three: “Seated with Him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus” (Ephesians 2:6). The ascension of Christ to the right hand of the Father, the place of supreme authority, intercession, and glory, is not an event from which the believer

is spatially and experientially distant. The believer, through her union with the ascended Christ, is already seated with Him in the heavenly places. This is a statement about her present spiritual reality, not merely her future eschatological hope: she already participates, through union with Christ, in the authority and access to the Father that belong to the ascended Lord.

The practical implications of this are developed in Ephesians 2:7, the purpose clause that discloses why God has placed the believer in this position: “so that in the ages to come He might show the surpassing riches of His grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus” (NASB 1995). The believer’s position in the heavenly places, raised and seated with Christ at the Father’s right hand, is not primarily for the believer’s own comfort or status, though it is that; it is for the display of the surpassing riches of divine grace before the universe across the whole of eternity. The believer is, in her very position of union with the ascended Christ, a permanent demonstration of the inexhaustible generosity of the God whose grace raised the spiritually dead and seated them, through union with His Son, in the highest place of honor in the created order.

The ascension union also grounds the believer’s access to the Father in prayer. In Ephesians 3:12, Paul writes that in Christ “we have boldness and confident access through faith in Him” (NASB 1995). The boldness and confidence are not the product of the believer’s own spiritual achievement; they are the consequence of her union with the One who has permanent, unrestricted access to the Father by right of His eternal Sonship and His completed atoning work. The believer approaches the Father not in her own righteousness, which would give her no boldness at all, but in the righteousness of the One with whom she is united, whose access to the Father is hers by virtue of the union. Prayer, from this perspective, is not the supplication of a distant petitioner approaching a reluctant deity; it is the communion of a person who is united to the divine Son, approaching the Father in the Son’s own access, with the Son’s own confidence, in the Son’s own name.

V. Union with Christ in His Life

Christ Living in the Believer

A. *The Indwelling Life, Galatians 2:20 and Colossians 1:27*

The consummation of the believer’s experiential union with Christ is found in what Paul describes as the living presence of Christ within the believer, not merely the benefits of Christ credited to the believer’s account, not merely the Spirit of Christ indwelling her as an agent distinct from Christ Himself, but Christ Himself living in her. “It is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me” (Galatians 2:20, NASB 1995). The claim is breathtaking in its intimacy: the resurrected, ascended, glorified Son of God, the One at whose name every knee will bow, makes His residence in the person of the believing sinner and animates her life with His own. This is not a metaphor for the transformation of her character under the influence of the gospel; it is a statement about the actual presence of Christ as the living center of her existence.

Colossians 1:27 provides Paul’s characterization of this indwelling as the mystery hidden across the ages and now disclosed in the gospel proclamation: “To whom God willed to make known what is the riches of the glory of this mystery among the Gentiles, which is Christ in you, the hope of glory.” The mystery that God has now unveiled is “Christ in you”, the indwelling presence of the risen Christ in the people of the New Covenant, Gentile as well as Jewish, as the ground of their confidence that the glory they have been promised will certainly come. The “hope

of glory” is not a vague aspiration toward a better future; it is the certain expectation of the consummation of the union, the day when the Christ who now lives hidden within the believer will be manifested in her glorification, and she will be like Him because she will see Him as He is (1 John 3:2).

The indwelling of Christ is closely related to, and in some expressions practically identified with, the indwelling of the Holy Spirit, as Romans 8:9–10 makes clear: “If anyone does not have the Spirit of Christ, he does not belong to Him. If Christ is in you, though the body is dead because of sin, yet the spirit is alive because of righteousness.” Paul moves in these verses between “the Spirit of God” (v. 9), “the Spirit of Christ” (v. 9), and “Christ in you” (v. 10) in ways that have led some interpreters to conclude that Paul identifies the indwelling Christ with the indwelling Spirit. The more careful theological account is that the Spirit is the agent of the union, the One who establishes and maintains the connection between the believer and the risen Christ, while Christ Himself is the person in whom the believer participates. The Spirit unites to Christ; Christ indwells through the Spirit.

The John 15 vine and branches discourse develops this indwelling life with a characteristic Johannine emphasis on abiding (menō): “Abide in Me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit of itself unless it abides in the vine, so neither can you unless you abide in Me” (John 15:4, NASB 1995). The mutual abiding, “Abide in Me, and I in you”, captures both dimensions of the vital union: the believer’s active maintenance of her connection to Christ through faith, prayer, and the Word, and Christ’s active indwelling that makes her fruitfulness possible. The fruit is not produced by the believer’s abiding alone, as if the abiding itself were the power; it is produced by the life of the vine flowing through the branch that abides. But the abiding is the necessary condition for the flow: the branch that does not abide is severed from its source of life and can produce nothing.

B. Christ as the Wisdom, Righteousness, Sanctification, and Redemption of the Believer

First Corinthians 1:30 provides what is perhaps the most comprehensive single-verse statement of the union’s soteriological content: “But by His doing you are in Christ Jesus, who became to us wisdom from God, and righteousness and sanctification, and redemption” (NASB 1995). Four extraordinary clauses, each building on the last. First: “By His doing you are in Christ Jesus”, the union itself is grounded in God’s sovereign initiative, not the believer’s spiritual achievement. Second: Christ “became to us wisdom from God”, the wisdom that the world’s philosophies and the Corinthians’ cultural pretensions could not provide is found not in a system of thought but in a person, the crucified and risen Christ who is the wisdom of God incarnate.

Third: Christ became “righteousness” for us, the forensic righteousness that the law demanded and that no sinner could produce is found in Christ, credited to the believer’s account through the union. The righteousness is not produced by the believer through moral effort; it is received from Christ through union, and it is as perfect, complete, and permanent as He is. Fourth: Christ became “sanctification” for us, the transformation of character and conduct that the law commanded and that no unaided human effort could sustain is also found in Christ, flowing from the vital union as the life of the vine flows into the branches. And fifth: Christ became “redemption” for us, the final liberation from the last vestiges of sin, the redemption of the body in glorification, the consummation of the whole saving work, is also in Christ, guaranteed by the union that nothing can dissolve.

The structure of 1 Corinthians 1:30 is the structure of the entire doctrine of union with Christ in miniature: everything the believer needs, wisdom, righteousness, sanctification, redemption, is found in Christ, and it is found there because she is in Christ. Not because she has applied the right spiritual formulas, observed the right disciplines, or achieved the right level of spiritual maturity, but “by His doing”, by the sovereign grace of the God

who placed her in Christ and who in doing so gave her everything that Christ is and has. This is why Paul's conclusion in verse 31 is the doxological refrain that sums up the entire doctrine: "just as it is written, 'Let him who boasts, boast in the Lord'" (NASB 1995). There is no other boast available to those who are "in Christ", because they have nothing that they did not receive, and everything they received they received in Him.

VI. The Pastoral Significance of Union with Christ

Apart from Him Nothing; In Him Everything

A. Union as the Ground of Assurance

The pastoral significance of the doctrine of union with Christ reaches into virtually every dimension of the Christian life, but its first and most fundamental application is to the ground of the believer's assurance. The question "Am I truly saved?" is, in the framework of union with Christ, equivalent to the question "Am I truly in Christ?", and the question "Am I truly in Christ?" is answerable not by gazing into the secret decree but by examining the evidence of the union's reality in the believer's life. The New Testament provides a rich and specific set of evidences: genuine faith in Christ as He is offered in the gospel (1 John 5:1), genuine love for the brethren who are also in Christ (1 John 3:14), genuine grief over sin and the desire for holiness (1 John 2:29; 3:9), the testimony of the Spirit with the believer's own spirit that she is a child of God (Romans 8:16), and the ongoing fruitfulness that the vital union with Christ as the vine produces in those who genuinely abide (John 15:5–8).

The union with Christ also grounds assurance by redirecting the believer's gaze from her own spiritual performance to the objective reality of the union itself. The believer who grounds her assurance in the consistency of her devotional life will find her assurance fluctuating with her devotional consistency; the believer who grounds her assurance in the quality of her repentance will find her assurance fluctuating with the perceived quality of her repentance. But the believer who grounds her assurance in her union with Christ, in the objective reality of being in the One who is her righteousness, sanctification, and redemption, has a ground of assurance that is as stable as the One with whom she is united. The union is real whether or not the believer feels it with full vividness on any given day; the righteousness is credited whether or not the believer senses its full weight in any given moment of prayer; the life is flowing from the vine whether or not the branch is conscious of every movement of sap. Assurance grounded in union with Christ is assurance grounded in the immutability of the One to whom the believer is inseparably joined.

Calvin himself returns again and again to this pastoral function of the union with Christ in his treatment of assurance in the *Institutes*. The direction he consistently gives to the anxious soul is: do not look inward, to the condition of your own faith or the quality of your own repentance; look to Christ, to the union with Him that the Spirit has established, to the evidences of that union in your life, and to the God who began the good work of union and will certainly perfect it. This is the pastoral genius of the doctrine: it redirects the gaze from the self (which will always provide grounds for anxiety, because the self is always imperfect) to Christ (who provides no grounds for anxiety, because He is always sufficient).

B. Union as the Ground of Sanctification

The second major pastoral application of the doctrine of union with Christ is to the ground and motivation of sanctification. The Reformed tradition has consistently insisted, against every form of antinomianism, that the union with Christ that justifies is the same union with Christ that sanctifies, and that the two cannot be separated without destroying the doctrine of salvation itself. Calvin's duplex gratia, the double grace of justification and sanctification, flows from the single union with Christ, and the believer who claims the forensic benefits of justification while living in a way that contradicts the vital benefits of sanctification has shown, not that she is a justified believer who happens not to be making progress in sanctification, but that she may not genuinely be in union with Christ at all.

James 2:17 and 1 John 3:9–10 make this connection in their own characteristic ways: genuine faith, the instrument through which union with Christ is received, is always a faith that produces works (James); genuine birth from God, which is the ground and nature of union with Christ, is always a birth that produces the righteousness characteristic of the One from whom it comes (1 John). The union with Christ does not merely provide the legal basis for the believer's standing; it provides the vital energy for her transformation. The command to "work out your salvation with fear and trembling" (Philippians 2:12) is immediately grounded in the declaration that "it is God who is at work in you, both to will and to work for His good pleasure" (v. 13), and the God who is at work in you is the God who is at work in you through the union with Christ that He has established.

The practical implication is that sanctification in the Reformed account is not primarily a matter of moral self-improvement motivated by the example of Christ or the commands of Scripture taken in isolation; it is the Spirit-empowered expression of the life that is flowing from the vine into the branch through the vital union. The believer who understands this will not approach the struggle against sin as a solitary effort but as the appropriation, through faith and prayer and the use of the means of grace, of the power of the risen Christ that is already available to her through the union. "Mortify therefore your members which are upon the earth" (Colossians 3:5, KJV) is a command that presupposes "you have been raised up with Christ" (v. 1) and "your life is hidden with Christ in God" (v. 3). The imperative is possible because the indicative is real, and the indicative is the doctrine of union with Christ.

C. Union as the Ground of Every Spiritual Blessing

The final and most comprehensive pastoral application of the doctrine is the one with which Ephesians 1 opens: every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places is located "in Christ" (v. 3). There is not a single saving benefit, not one element of the ordo salutis, not one promise of Scripture, not one ground of hope for this life or the next, that the believer possesses apart from her union with Christ. Justification is in Christ. Adoption is in Christ. Sanctification is in Christ. Perseverance is in Christ. Glorification is in Christ. Every prayer that is heard is heard through Christ. Every promise that is "yes" is "yes" in Christ (2 Corinthians 1:20). The life that the believer lives, she lives in the flesh by faith in the Son of God who loved her and gave Himself for her. And the death that she will die, if she dies before the Lord returns, she will die in Christ, and the One who said "I am the resurrection and the life" (John 11:25, NASB 1995) will not leave her there.

Calvin's summary of this pastoral reality is the most precise and most beautiful in the history of theology: "We see that our whole salvation and all its parts are comprehended in Christ. We should therefore take care not to derive the least portion of it from anywhere else. If we seek salvation, we are taught by the very name of Jesus that it is 'of him' (1 Cor. 1:30). If we seek any other gifts of the Spirit, they will be found in his anointing. If we seek strength, it lies in his dominion; if purity, in his conception; if gentleness, it appears in his birth... if redemption, it lies in his

death; if acquittal from condemnation, in his resurrection; if immortality, in his entrance into life” (Institutes II.16.19). Everything in Christ. Nothing outside of Him. This is the gospel. This is union with Christ. And this is why the doctrine of union with Christ is not a technical scholastic category for advanced students of systematic theology; it is the most practically important truth that any believer can possess, because it tells her where everything she needs is to be found.

“But by His doing you are in Christ Jesus, who became to us wisdom from God, and righteousness and sanctification, and redemption, so that, just as it is written, ‘Let him who boasts, boast in the Lord.’”

1 Corinthians 1:30–31, NASB 1995

Theological Terms and Definitions

Union with Christ	The real, spiritual, vital, and indissoluble bond by which the Holy Spirit joins the believing sinner to the person of the risen Lord Jesus Christ, so that the believer participates in Christ and all His saving benefits. Union with Christ is the organizing center of Pauline soteriology and the meta-category within which all other elements of the <i>ordo salutis</i> find their proper relation. Distinguished by its four dimensions: federal/representational (Christ as covenant head), mystical/spiritual (Spirit-established personal bond), vital/organic (living connection through which Christ's life flows), and experiential (participation in Christ's death, resurrection, and life).
En Christō	Greek: "in Christ." The Pauline formula (and its variants: <i>en autō</i> , "in Him"; <i>en tō kuriō</i> , "in the Lord"; <i>syn Christō</i> , "with Christ") appearing over 160 times in Paul's letters. No other phrase in the Pauline corpus approaches this frequency. The formula captures the full range of the believer's relationship to the person of Christ, legal, vital, spatial, temporal, and eschatological. Every spiritual blessing is located "in Christ" (Ephesians 1:3); every saving benefit is received through union with His person, not merely through the external application of His work.
Federal Union	The representational or covenantal dimension of union with Christ, in which Christ acts as the believer's covenant head, so that His obedience and death are legally credited to the believer's account by virtue of his representative standing. The federal union parallels and reverses the federal union with Adam: as Adam's sin is imputed to all who are in him by natural generation (Romans 5:12–19), Christ's righteousness is imputed to all who are in Him by regeneration and faith. The federal union grounds the doctrine of justification by providing the legal mechanism by which an alien righteousness is credited to the believer's account.
Mystical Union	The real but spiritually invisible bond established by the Holy Spirit between the believer's person and the risen person of Christ, by which the believer genuinely participates in Christ and not merely in the legal benefits of His work. The mystical union participates in and is analogous to the union between the Father and the Son (John 17:21–23). It exceeds the categories of ordinary human relationship, which is why the New Testament uses the marriage union as its closest human analogy (Ephesians 5:31–32) while insisting that even that analogy falls short of the full reality. The mystical union is established by the Spirit, not by any human effort or experience.
Vital Union	The living, dynamic dimension of union with Christ through which the life and power of Christ actually flow into and through the believer, producing genuine spiritual vitality, growth, and fruitfulness. Most fully expressed in the vine and branches image of John 15:1–8. The vital union is the dimension that most directly bears on sanctification: the fruitfulness of the Christian life is not produced by the believer's unaided effort but by the life of the vine flowing into the branch through the organic connection. Apart from the vine (apart from Christ), the branch can do nothing (John 15:5).
Duplex Gratia	Latin: "double grace." Calvin's theological term for the inseparable twin benefits of union with Christ: justification (the forensic declaration of righteousness) and sanctification (the transforming work of the Spirit toward Christlikeness). Both flow from the single union with Christ; neither can be received without the other. To possess Christ is to possess both, not in the same logical sense (justification is complete; sanctification is progressive), but in the same relational reality: the Christ who is the believer's righteousness is the same Christ who is the believer's sanctification, and He cannot be divided.
Abiding	The Johannine concept (Greek: <i>menō</i> , to remain, abide, dwell) describing the believer's ongoing, active maintenance of her connection to Christ through faith, prayer, and the Word,

	and simultaneously Christ's ongoing indwelling presence in the believer (John 15:4–7; 1 John 3:24). Abiding is not the ground of the union (the union is established by the Spirit through regeneration) but the condition of its ongoing fruitfulness (the branch must remain attached to the vine to bear fruit). The command to abide is addressed to those who are already in the vine, already in Christ, as the exhortation to live consciously from within the union that the Spirit has already established.
Reckon / Logizomai	Greek: to reckon, count, consider, calculate, the same term used for the imputation of righteousness in Romans 4. In Romans 6:11, Paul uses logizomai as the practical command that applies the union with Christ in death: "consider yourselves to be dead to sin, but alive to God in Christ Jesus." The reckoning is not a pretending or a psychological exercise; it is the act of treating as true what is actually true by virtue of the union with Christ. The death to sin and the life to God are objective realities; the imperative is to live from within those realities by persistently reckoning them as the true account of who the believer is in Christ.
Participatio Christi	Latin: "participation in Christ." The theological concept, developed especially in Calvin, that union with Christ involves genuine participation in the person of Christ and not merely the external crediting of His benefits. The distinction matters: if salvation is merely the external crediting of Christ's merits to the sinner's account without any genuine participation in Christ Himself, then the Savior and His benefits are separable, and the sinner might conceivably receive the benefits without receiving Him. The Reformed tradition, following Calvin, insists that Christ and His benefits are inseparable: to be in Christ is to participate in Christ, and all benefits flow from and through that participation.
Mutual Indwelling	The Johannine formulation of the mystical union, expressed in John 14:20 ("I am in My Father, and you in Me, and I in you") and John 17:21–23. The structure of the mutual indwelling is Trinitarian: the Son is in the Father, the believer is in the Son, and the Son is in the believer. The union between Christ and the believer participates in (though is not identical with) the union between the Father and Son, a genuine but non-deifying participation in the Trinitarian life that is the ultimate eschatological goal of the saving relationship. Christ prays that believers would be one in the Father and Son (John 17:21) as the highest expression of the union's purpose.

Practical Application

A. For the Mind: What Must We Believe?

We must believe that union with Christ is not a technical category for theological specialists but the single most important truth about the believer's existence, the truth that defines who she is, what she possesses, and where every spiritual benefit she needs is to be found. The implications of this belief are total and transforming. To believe that every spiritual blessing is "in Christ" (Ephesians 1:3) is to believe that there is no spiritual good available to the Christian outside of her relationship to the person of Christ, not in religious technique, not in the accumulation of correct doctrine, not in the performance of spiritual disciplines as ends in themselves, not in any form of self-improvement or self-transcendence that is not explicitly grounded in and directed by the union with the risen Lord. Everything is in Christ. Nothing is outside of Him.

We must believe, with equal conviction, that union with Christ is an objective spiritual reality established by the sovereign work of the Holy Spirit, and that its truth does not depend on the intensity of the believer's subjective experience of it on any given day. The branch may not always feel the sap flowing; the sap flows nonetheless. The believer may not always feel the life of Christ animating her; that life is animating her nonetheless, if she is genuinely in Christ. This is not a counsel to ignore the subjective dimension of the union or to be indifferent to the quality of one's conscious communion with Christ; it is a counsel to ground one's assurance and one's identity in something more stable than the fluctuations of religious feeling, namely, the objective reality of the union that the Spirit has established through regeneration and that He maintains through His unbreakable commitment to the people He has joined to Christ.

We must also believe what Calvin believed: that Christ cannot be divided. The Christ who is the believer's righteousness is the Christ who is her sanctification; the Christ who bore her sins is the Christ who now lives in her; and the Christ who will raise her body at the last day is the Christ who already reigns in her heart by the Spirit. To receive Christ is to receive all of Him, His atoning death, His obedient life, His risen power, His interceding presence, His sovereign authority, and His inexhaustible wisdom, not in sequential installments as the believer achieves successive levels of spiritual maturity, but all at once, in the one indivisible gift of Himself that is the gospel offer. We have Christ, or we have nothing; and if we have Christ, we have everything.

B. For the Heart: What Must We Feel and Desire?

The emotional register that the doctrine of union with Christ should produce in the believer is an intimate, personal, and doxologically charged wonder, the wonder of someone who has discovered not merely that she has been given a great gift but that she has been given the Giver Himself, and that in possessing the Giver she possesses all the gifts. This is not the detached intellectual appreciation of an interesting theological category; it is the response of a soul that has understood, perhaps for the first time with full clarity, that the relationship she has with Christ is not a transactional arrangement in which she meets the required conditions and receives the specified benefits, but a union so intimate, so personal, and so comprehensive that the apostle can only describe it with the language of marriage and the mutual indwelling of the divine Persons.

Desire the experiential reality of what is already true of you objectively. You are already in Christ, already united to Him by the Spirit's sovereign work, already justified by His righteousness, already seated with Him in the heavenly places, already having His life as the animating center of your existence. The desire that this doctrine

should produce is not the desire to achieve a union that you do not yet have, but the desire to live more consciously, more deliberately, and more trustingly from within the union that you already possess. The command of Colossians 3:1–2, “keep seeking the things above” and “set your mind on the things above”, is not a command to achieve a new spiritual state; it is a command to live consistently with the spiritual state that is already yours in Christ. Desire that consistency.

Desire, above all, Christ Himself, not merely His benefits, not primarily His gifts, not only the relief from condemnation or the hope of heaven, but the Person from whom all those things flow and without whom none of them are available or even meaningful. The soul that has genuinely understood union with Christ has discovered that the greatest blessing of the gospel is not what Christ gives but who Christ is, and that the possession of Christ is the possession of everything the soul was ever made to need. Let the doctrine of union with Christ deepen your desire for Christ Himself, and you will find that every other desire of the redeemed soul, for righteousness, for peace, for assurance, for fruitfulness, for the fullness of the Spirit, for the glory of the age to come, is also deepened, because all of them are found in Him.

C. For the Hands: What Must We Do?

- Read Romans 6:1–11 as a single sustained argument, noting the movement from the doctrinal foundation (vv. 1–10, what is true of the believer by virtue of union with Christ in His death and resurrection) to the practical imperative (v. 11, “consider yourselves to be dead to sin, but alive to God in Christ Jesus”). Ask: in your own battle against sin, are you fighting from the position that verse 11 describes, as one who is already dead to sin and alive to God, or are you fighting from the position of someone who is trying to achieve that state through moral effort? How would the practical battle against specific recurring sins in your life look different if you were consistently reckoning yourself as verse 11 commands?
- Spend one week reading Ephesians 1:3–14 slowly, once per day, noting every occurrence of “in Christ,” “in Him,” or “in the Beloved” and identifying the specific blessing attached to each occurrence. At the end of the week, write a comprehensive list of everything that the passage locates “in Christ.” Then ask: which of these blessings do I most need to receive more personally? Which have I been seeking outside of their proper location in Christ? And how does the consistent repetition of the formula “in Christ” throughout the passage shape the way you understand the relationship between the blessings and the Blessor?
- Read Galatians 2:19–20 word by word, slowly, as a personal theological autobiography: “I have been crucified with Christ”, what old self, old pattern, old identity does this past-tense death describe in your own experience? “It is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me”, what does it mean, concretely and practically, for Christ to be the animating center of your daily existence rather than your own autonomous desires and plans? “The life which I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave Himself up for me”, is the present life you are living, your specific daily choices, priorities, relationships, and habits, genuinely a life of faith in the Son of God? Where is it most clearly that? Where is it least?
- Read John 15:1–11 as a meditation on abiding, noting what Jesus says about the conditions of fruitfulness (abiding, v. 4–5), the consequence of not abiding (withering and burning, v. 6), the promise attached to abiding (asking and receiving, v. 7), the purpose of abiding (bearing much fruit for the Father’s glory, v. 8), and the relationship between abiding and the joy of Christ (v. 11). Ask: in what specific areas of your life are you most genuinely abiding in Christ, drawing on His life, depending on His power, living in conscious awareness of the union? And in what areas are you most attempting to bear fruit from your own resources apart from Him? How would your daily rhythms of prayer, Scripture, and fellowship look different if you

understood them as the means of abiding in the vine rather than as religious duties performed to earn divine favor?

- Memorize 1 Corinthians 1:30–31 and use it as the organizing framework for your prayer life for one month: before bringing any petition to God, locate the specific need in Christ. Need wisdom for a decision? “Christ became to us wisdom from God”, ask for it in Him, not from your own intellectual resources. Need righteousness, the assurance of standing accepted before God? “Christ became to us... righteousness”, look to Him, not to your own performance. Need the power to grow in holiness? “Christ became to us... sanctification”, draw on His life, not your own willpower. Need freedom from the remnants of sin’s bondage and the hope of final redemption? “Christ became to us... redemption”, rest in what He has secured. Everything you need is in Him.

Key Texts: *Ephesians 1:3–14; Romans 6:1–11; Galatians 2:19–20; John 15:1–11; Colossians 3:1–4; 1 Corinthians 1:30–31; John 14:20; 17:21–23; Ephesians 2:5–6; Colossians 1:27*

Study and Discussion Questions

Opening Question

- Before studying this lesson, how central has the concept of “union with Christ” been in your understanding of the Christian life? Have you primarily thought of salvation in terms of receiving benefits from Christ (forgiveness, eternal life, etc.) or in terms of being united to Christ as a person? How does the distinction between these two ways of conceiving salvation affect the way you experience the Christian life day-to-day? And what was your initial reaction when the lesson identified union with Christ as “the most important phrase in the New Testament” and the organizing center of Pauline soteriology?

Observation Questions (What Do the Texts Say?)

- Read Ephesians 1:3–14 carefully, noting every occurrence of “in Christ,” “in Him,” or “in the Beloved.” Make a list of each occurrence with the specific blessing or divine act that is attached to it. What is the grammatical structure of the first verse (“blessed be... who has blessed us... in Christ”): does the blessing flow from the human being to God, or from God to the human being? How does this grammatical structure establish the initiative and sovereignty that are characteristic of every occurrence of the “in Christ” formula in the passage?
- Read Romans 6:1–11 as a sustained argument. What is the antinomian objection Paul addresses in verse 1? What is the doctrinal ground of his refutation (vv. 2–10)? What is the practical imperative that the doctrinal ground supports (v. 11)? In verse 3, what does Paul appeal to (“or do you not know”) as the basis of his argument, what knowledge does he assume the Roman believers already possess? And what is the logical relationship between the death described in verses 3–7 and the life described in verses 8–10: are they simultaneous, sequential, or mutually implying?
- Read Galatians 2:19–20. In verse 19, what did Paul die to (through what instrument) and in order to do what? In verse 20, Paul makes three claims in rapid succession: (1) he has been crucified with Christ, (2) it is no longer he who lives but Christ who lives in him, and (3) the life he now lives he lives by faith. What is the logical relationship among these three claims, do they describe the same reality from three perspectives, or three sequential stages of a spiritual development? And how does the final clause (“who loved me and gave Himself up for me”) ground the entire verse in the personal, specific, historically accomplished love of Christ?
- Read John 15:1–8. What are the three parties in the vine metaphor: who is the vinedresser, who is the vine, and who are the branches? What does the vinedresser do to branches (v. 2), and what is the purpose of each of His acts (v. 2)? What is the condition for bearing fruit (v. 4–5)? What happens to a branch that does not abide (v. 6)? What is the promise attached to abiding (v. 7)? And what is the stated purpose of the entire arrangement (v. 8)? How does the vine metaphor capture both the organic character of the union (life flowing from vine to branch) and the responsible character of the believer’s part (the branch must abide)?
- Read 1 Corinthians 1:30–31. What four things does Paul say Christ “became to us,” and in what order does he list them? How does the opening phrase (“by His doing you are in Christ Jesus”) establish the sovereignty of grace as the ground of the entire verse? What is the relationship between each of the four things Christ “became” and the specific needs or lacks of the Corinthian Christians in their cultural context (a city that prized human wisdom, social status, and philosophical achievement)? And how does the concluding doxological citation (“Let him who boasts, boast in the Lord”) identify the only legitimate basis for boasting?

Interpretation Questions (What Does It Mean?)

- The lesson describes four dimensions of union with Christ: federal, mystical, vital, and experiential. For each dimension, identify (a) the specific theological problem or benefit it addresses, (b) the primary biblical text that expresses it, and (c) the practical implication it carries for the Christian life. How do the four dimensions relate to each other, are they independent aspects of four different relationships, or are they four perspectives on the single complex reality of union with the one person of Christ? And which dimension do you find most personally significant or most practically needed in your own spiritual life?
- Calvin's insistence that the union with Christ is the organizing center of the *ordo salutis*, specifically, that justification and sanctification are the *duplex gratia* (double grace) of the single union, is identified in the lesson as his distinctive contribution to Reformed soteriology. What specific theological problem does the *duplex gratia* framework solve? How does it prevent both antinomianism (separating justification from sanctification) and legalism (turning sanctification into the ground of justification)? And how does it guard against the popular conception of salvation as the reception of benefits from a somewhat distant Christ, rather than the participation in the person of the indwelling Savior?
- The lesson argues that union with Christ is the meta-category within which every other element of the *ordo salutis* finds its proper relation. Take one specific element of the *ordo*, say, justification, and trace how understanding it as a dimension of union with Christ (rather than as a standalone divine act directed at an isolated sinner) changes the way it is understood and applied. What specifically does the phrase "in Christ" add to the doctrine of justification that is not captured by the doctrine of imputation alone? And what is lost in a doctrine of justification that is not grounded in and expressed through the union with Christ?
- The lesson's treatment of Romans 6:1–11 argues that the death to sin is an objective reality ("he who has died is freed from sin," v. 7, a legal principle) that the believer is commanded to reckon as true (v. 11), rather than a subjective state to be achieved through spiritual discipline. What is the practical difference between these two approaches to the battle against sin? What specific dangers does the subjective-achievement approach produce (legalism, despair, moral striving disconnected from grace)? And how does the objective-reckoning approach both honor the reality of the union and preserve the genuine moral seriousness of the command?
- The lesson describes the seated-with-Christ reality of Ephesians 2:6 as a present spiritual reality (not merely a future eschatological hope) and identifies it as the ground of the believer's bold access to the Father in prayer (Ephesians 3:12). How does understanding the ascension union, being seated with Christ in the heavenly places, change the way the believer approaches prayer? Specifically: if the believer's access to the Father is the access of the One with whom she is seated at the Father's right hand, what does this imply about the basis of her boldness, the nature of her authority in prayer, and the confidence with which she brings both petition and praise?

Application Questions (What Does It Demand of Us?)

- The lesson argues that the doctrine of union with Christ fundamentally reorients the Christian life from a "religion of transactions" (receiving benefits from a somewhat distant Christ in exchange for meeting required conditions) to a "relationship of union" (receiving Christ Himself, in whom all benefits are located). Evaluate your own Christianity honestly against this distinction. In what specific dimensions of your spiritual life has it functioned more as a religion of transactions? What would a more thoroughly union-with-Christ-centered practice of prayer, Scripture reading, corporate worship, and moral struggle look like? And what

specific changes in your daily spiritual rhythms would make the union with Christ more consciously the center from which everything flows?

- The lesson's treatment of the vital union (Section II-C) and the abiding language of John 15 argues that the believer's fruitfulness is the organic result of the life of the vine flowing into the branch, not the product of the branch's independent effort. In the specific areas of your life where you most want to grow in Christlikeness, in love, in patience, in courage, in purity, in generosity, are you approaching that growth more as the organic receiving of Christ's life through the means of grace (prayer, Scripture, fellowship, the ordinances) or more as the achievement of a personal improvement project? What would it look like to pursue that growth through more conscious abiding in Christ rather than through more determined self-improvement?
- Calvin's summary in the Institutes (II.16.19), quoted at the close of Section VI, locates every dimension of saving benefit in a specific aspect of Christ's person and work: wisdom in His anointing, strength in His dominion, purity in His conception, gentleness in His birth, acquittal in His resurrection, immortality in His entrance into life. Take one specific spiritual need you are currently experiencing, one thing you need and do not feel that you have, and work through Calvin's method: find where that need is met in the specific work of Christ, and then bring it to Christ in prayer as the One who is that need's specific supply. Report to your study group what you discover.
- The lesson closes with the pastoral application that the doctrine of union with Christ redirects assurance from the self (where it will always find grounds for anxiety) to Christ (who provides no grounds for anxiety). Are you currently experiencing spiritual anxiety, uncertainty about your standing before God, doubt about the genuineness of your conversion, or fear that something in your past or present has broken the connection between you and God? If so: identify the specific thing that is producing the anxiety, and then trace how the doctrine of union with Christ addresses it specifically. Is the anxiety produced by something in Christ's person, work, or faithfulness, or by something in your own performance? If the latter, how does the truth that your standing before God is grounded in your union with Christ rather than in your performance apply to that specific anxiety?

Prayer Focus

Open this lesson's prayer time with a slow, devotional reading of John 17:20–26, the section of Jesus' high priestly prayer that is addressed not to the eleven in the room but to "those who believe in Me through their word" (v. 20), which is to say, to you. This prayer was prayed for you, by the eternal Son of God, on the night of His betrayal, in the hours before He went to the cross to accomplish the very salvation that this prayer anticipated. He prayed that you would be one in the Father and Son (v. 21), that you would be with Him where He is (v. 24), that you would see His glory (v. 24), and that the love with which the Father loved the Son would be in you and He Himself in you (v. 26). Read these words and receive them as what they are: the specific, personal, interceding prayer of the One who is your union with the Father, spoken for you before He died to make that union possible.

Pray with the four dimensions of the union as the structure of your adoration. Begin with the federal union: thank Christ for standing as your covenant head, for taking your sin as His own and giving you His righteousness as your own, for the great exchange by which the perfectly obedient One became sin for you, so that you might become the righteousness of God in Him (2 Corinthians 5:21). Thank the Father for ordaining this exchange in the *pactum salutis* before the world was made, for appointing the Son as your representative and head, and for receiving you in the Son's own righteousness as if it were your own. Let the forensic peace of justification settle on your conscience: not a tentative peace that depends on your own performance, but the peace that comes from a verdict pronounced over you in the righteousness of the One who cannot be found wanting.

Move to the mystical union: thank the Spirit for establishing the real, personal, invisible bond between your person and the risen person of Christ, the bond that makes you genuinely a participant in Christ and not merely the external recipient of His benefits. Thank Him for the mystery of Colossians 1:27, that "Christ in you" is the hope of glory, that the very same Christ who sits at the Father's right hand in the full glory of His ascended lordship is also the Christ who inhabits your soul, who animates your new life, who intercedes for you at the right hand of the Father. Let the intimacy of this reality register: you are not dealing with a distant Savior whose benefits are administered to you through an ecclesiastical system or a spiritual discipline; you are in living union with a present, indwelling, loving, sovereign Lord.

Thank Christ for the vital union, for being the vine to your branch, the source of every spiritual fruitfulness, the supply of every spiritual need. Confess the specific ways in which you have been attempting to bear fruit from your own resources, in your own strength, by your own willpower, through your own accumulated spiritual experience, rather than by abiding in Him and receiving His life as the power of every good work. Ask Him to cultivate in you a deeper abiding: a more consistent returning to the Word where He speaks, a more earnest prayer through which you draw on His life, a more honest communion with the people who are also in Him and through whom He ministers His life to you. Ask the Spirit to make the vine and branches reality of John 15 more than a beautiful metaphor and more concretely the actual structure of your daily existence.

Close with a Trinitarian doxology grounded in the doctrine of union: praise the Father who chose you in Christ before the foundation of the world, who blessed you with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places in Christ (Ephesians 1:3–4), who gave you not only gifts but the Giver, not only blessings but the Blessed One Himself. Praise the Son who became to you wisdom from God and righteousness and sanctification and redemption (1 Corinthians 1:30), who gave you not only His obedience but Himself, not only His death but His life, not only His past history but His present indwelling. Praise the Spirit who established and maintains the union, who is Himself the bond

between you and Christ, the arrabōn of the inheritance, and the One who cries within you “Abba, Father” (Romans 8:15–16). Let the praise rise from within the union itself, the praise of a branch that knows it is in the vine, of a bride who knows she belongs to the Bridegroom, of a person who knows that everything she is and has and will be is in Christ.

“I am the vine, you are the branches; he who abides in Me and I in him, he bears much fruit, for apart from Me you can do nothing.”

John 15:5, NASB 1995

Key Texts: Ephesians 1:3–14; Romans 6:1–11; Galatians 2:19–20; John 15:1–11; 17:20–26; Colossians 3:1–4; 1 Corinthians 1:30–31; Ephesians 2:5–6; Colossians 1:27; 2 Corinthians 5:17, 21

Soli Deo Gloria
To God Alone Be the Glory

FAITHFUL TO THE WORD

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