

## The Plan & Goal of Union

Westview Church | Ephesians 1:3-14 | Pastor Brett Toney | April 7, 2024

### Most Central Doctrine

What would you say is the most central doctrine of the Christian faith? Or, another way to consider it, what is the lynchpin teaching of Scripture that keeps the hope of our salvation all together? There are a number of contenders that may come to mind. You may argue that God's sovereignty in all things takes pride of place. Or drawing from 1 Corinthians, you would say it is Christ crucified. Or you've heard the line attributed to Martin Luther, "Justification is the article by which the Church stands and falls," and you would ardently say justification is *the* doctrine. Church, I would say the doctrine of our union with Christ is *the* most central doctrine. It is, as a number of theologians have described it, the central hub of a wheel that all other doctrines related to our salvation are connected to. Yes, even justification is derived from our union with Christ.

We are going to take the month of April to focus on this most important doctrine that you perhaps have never heard of. But rather than thinking of this as taking a break from our series in 1 Corinthians, consider it more of a deep dive into a key theme of the book. The gospel solution to the church problems in Corinth is union with Christ. 1 Corinthians 1:30, "Because of him you are *in Christ Jesus*, who became to us wisdom from God, righteousness and sanctification and redemption." You ought to flee sexual immortality because you are members *of Christ* (6:15). We reject idolatry and the abuses of Communion because we are one body (10:17). We leverage Spirit-given gifts in love as one Body, *Christ's* body (12-14). It is *in Christ* that all are made alive (15:22). It has been argued that union with Christ is the prevailing focus of Paul's theology.

So, Church, I want you to be informed and learn more about this doctrine. But, more than that, I want these weeks to deepen your capacity for enjoying the intimacy with the Triune God

that he has accomplished for you. May your daily devotions go to another level as you meditate on your union with Christ. May the sin present in your life feel all the more foreign because you reckon with your union with the holy Christ. May your marriage take on greater importance and value as an expression of worship and evangelism because you see how it reflects your union with Christ. And we start this morning with Ephesians 1. Theologian Anthony Hoekema, in his book on the subject *Saved By Grace*, says union with Christ is “extending all the way from eternity to eternity.”<sup>1</sup> And in looking at Ephesians 1:3-14, Hoekema captures it as the roots of union, the basis of union, and the actual union. We’ll follow his outline this morning.

### **The Roots of Union (Ephesians 1:3-4)**

We see in v.3-4 the union of Christ extends back into eternity past when God resolved to bless us *in Christ* even as he chose us *in Christ* before the foundation of the world. How many times do you think you have read that little prepositional phrase, “in Christ”? It may be dismissed as a bit of a throwaway jargon. But from here on out, pay attention to it every time you come across it in the Bible. You will start to see how pervasive this theme is. Paul doesn’t say God blessed us *because* of Christ or chose us *on the basis* of Christ. Paul intentional locates our blessing and election *in Christ*. The root of our union is there in eternity past, before the foundation of the world.

We can read that repeated phrase, used nine times in our passage, but what does it mean? What does it mean to be “in Christ,” to be united with Jesus? To help us wade into this doctrine rooted here in v.3-4, consider a handful of comments from theologians throughout the years. I’m going to share more quotes than normal with the aim of flooring you with the magnitude of this teaching. This isn’t my new hobby horse. God’s people have been overawed by this for millennia. Just listen and absorb. I’ll share the quotes later for you to re-read.

1. First, Augustine, “For [Christ] the Head, with all the members, is but One Man. And . . . no one can ascend [to Heaven], but he who in His Body is made a member of Him.”<sup>2</sup>
2. Martin Luther, “But so far as justification is concerned, Christ and I must be so closely attached that He lives in me and I in Him. What a marvelous way of speaking! *Because He lives in me*, whatever grace, righteousness, life, peace, and salvation there is in me is all Christ’s.”<sup>3</sup>
3. John Calvin wrote, “We must understand that as long as Christ remains outside of us, and we are separated from him, all that he has suffered and done for the salvation of the human race remains useless and of no value for us . . . All that he possesses is nothing to us until we grow into one body with him.”<sup>4</sup>
4. Richard Gaffin, “The expression union with Christ refers [to] the believer’s solidarity or association with Christ, by the Holy Spirit and through faith, by virtue of which believers partake of his saving benefits.”<sup>5</sup>
5. Sinclair Ferguson, “If you don’t think of yourself fundamentally as someone who is in Christ, then I think we could say from the New Testament’s point of view, you have missed the New Testament’s perspective of what it actually means for you to be a Christian.”
6. Last, John Murray, which if you want to read anything more on this, read his small book *Redemption Accomplished & Applied*, where he writes, “Union with Christ is the central truth of the whole doctrine of salvation. All to which the people of God have been predestined in the eternal election of God, all that has been secured and procured for them in the once-for-all accomplishment of redemption, all of which they become the actual partakers in the application of redemption, and all that by God’s grace they will become in the state of consummated bliss is embraced within the compass of union and communion with Christ.”<sup>6</sup> (170)

Are you getting the picture? All of salvation flows from our union with Christ which God endeavored to do in his Son in eternity past. Consider it with this illustration. Kids, help me out here. Who has been to Lake Itasca in northern Minnesota? Show of hands? It’s neither big nor deep. You know it’s significance though, right? It is a spring-fed lake that is the headwaters of

the Mississippi River. The Mighty Mississippi stretches 2,300 miles to the Gulf of Mexico and is the drainage basin for 41% of the country. Our union with Christ is the artesian spring from which all the benefits of Christ are ours. Adoption, sanctification, redemption, perseverance, justification, glorification—they flow from our indispensable, vital, organic, and intimate connection with Jesus. That’s getting at the root of our union.

### **The Basis of Union (Ephesians 1:5-9)**

The basis of our union then is the work of Christ in accomplishing what the Father purposed to do in him. So, consider that little phrase again in v.5-9. We are adopted through Jesus, v.5, and have been blessed by his grace *in the Beloved*, v.6. V.7, “*In him* we have redemption.” V.9, God’s will has been made known, “set forth *in Christ*.” We do not achieve our union on our own. We don’t add ourselves to the temple God is building. We don’t graft ourselves into the vine. We don’t transplant ourselves into the Body. God accomplishes his purpose to “bless us ... with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places ... *in the Beloved*” (v.3, 6). The Father’s delight in and affection for the Son is so warm and familial that Jesus is marked off and set apart as the One Loved of God. There is none loved like the Beloved.

And the “redemption through his blood” is the basis on which “sons of disobedience” and “children of wrath” (2:2-3) are adopted to God “himself as sons through Jesus Christ.” That is the plan of God. Before Adam sinned, before humanity fell into depravity and curse, God intended to redeem to himself a people through the death of his incarnate Son. His will and purpose was to adopt sons *in the Son*. We need not generalize that to being adopted as sons *and* daughters. Ladies, there is a sense in which you are “sons through Jesus Christ,” just as, fellas, you are the Bride of Christ. They are relational images to convey the relationship we have. The sonship that is yours, Church, through Jesus Christ is his sonship. The only means by which you

can be adopted is if you are in Christ—if you share in his sonship. Being adopted in the Son, you are adopted in the Beloved. All the delight and affection the Father has for the Beloved, he now has for you.

### **The Actual Union (Ephesians 1:10-13)**

The basis of the union has been effective to establish the actual union. By offering himself once and for all in the place of sinners and rising in victory over sin, Death, and the Devil, Jesus has eternally secured for himself a people united intimately with him. But the realm of union extends beyond the Redeemed. God's plan was "to unite *all things* in him." Christ is the sphere in which all things are restored and made knew. He is the culmination of creation and history. All things are reconciled for the crowning glory of Christ. So, Church, if all things are united *in him*, then most assuredly are you who are blessed in him, chosen in him, redeemed in him.

But that isn't enough. The Spirit is not satisfied for you to just know that. He wants you to experience it. Verse 13 is the sublime culmination of the reality of our union. It's a complex sentence, so let me read more concisely, "*In him* you also ... were sealed with the promised Holy Spirit." The guarantee of your actual union with Christ is the seal of God's Spirit. The Father planned to bless you in Christ by uniting you to Christ and confirming you in Christ by the Spirit. Do not quake before suffering. Do not give way to unbelief. Do not surrender to sin. Christian, you are *in Christ* sealed by the Spirit.

Imagine it this way—Inconel is a super alloy used in extreme environments with high temperatures and pressure. I'm told it is very hard to shape. But this is my illustration so go with me. A craftsman fashions an envelope out of Inconel, places a card inside, and drips hot wax on the closure of this metallic envelope. He presses his emblem in the wax and seals it. The card

inside the Inconel was quite secure from fire and stressors and threats. Yet the seal is further evidence that the craftsman stands by his work and guarantees the contents of his unique envelope. Christian, you are secure in Christ and sealed by God the Spirit. What you believe about election or predestination or doctrine is irrelevant. You are secure in Christ. Yet you are actually united to Christ more intimately than that—he's not cold metal encompassing you.

### **Communion & Marriage**

Consider that as we keep reading in Ephesians, we find this most central of doctrines continue to unfold and be applied. This actual union that is ours in Christ finds expression in one of the most significant illustrations of it towards the end of Ephesians. Paul articulates this doctrine of our union with Christ in the familiar, latter half of chapter five. We so often focus on the shadow rather than the substance. We read commands to wives and husbands and get bent out of shape about submission and headship. Paul is talking about union with Christ. The mystery of a man and woman being made one flesh in marriage is about Christ and the Church. We have been made one flesh with the Lord Jesus. And O how he delights in his Bride. Michael Reeves says she makes his heart skip a beat and his eyes dilate.<sup>7</sup> If an earthly husband can so purely delight in his earthly wife as a shadow, how much more so the substance of Christ and his Bride.

That's what we celebrate when we come to the Table. This Bread and Cup anticipate the "marriage supper of the Lamb" (Rev 19:9). The first marriage was but a shadow of the last marriage. Adam's wedding vow to his bride, "This is at last bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh" (Gen 2:23) is made actual in the eternal union of Christ to his Bride. It is scandalous that an unfaithful Bride such as us would be so intimately united to the King of Kings. This intimacy

is yours to enjoy with the Triune God that he has accomplished for you. That—that is the plan and goal of your union in Christ.

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<sup>1</sup> Anthony Hoekema, *Saved By Grace* [via Justin Taylor](#)

<sup>2</sup> Augustine of Hippo, “Sermons on Selected Lessons of the New Testament,” in *Sermon on the Mount, Harmony of the Gospels, Homilies on the Gospels*, ed. Philip Schaff, trans. R. G. MacMullen, vol. 6, A Select Library of the Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church, First Series (New York: Christian Literature Co., 1888), 41.7–8 (spelling modernized). [Via DG](#)

<sup>3</sup> Luther quoted by [Marcus Peter Johnson at Crossway](#)

<sup>4</sup> Calvin, *Institutes*, III.i.1

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/essay/union-with-christ/>

<sup>6</sup> John Murray, *Redemption Accomplished & Applied*, 170.

<sup>7</sup> Michael Reeves, “[The Lord of the Church](#)”