

The School of Christian Theology

Lesson 11

Our Union with Christ

Objective: To understand that all the blessings of salvation which Christ procured becomes ours only by being in union with Him. To recognize that we are brought into union with Christ through the operation of the Spirit. And to gain a fuller appreciation of the depth and breath of that union.

Our lesson today flows closely out of last week's, for it is by virtue of being united with the One who is our Mediator that we become partakers of His mediation. Christ has procured redemption for us, along with all other benefits of the covenant of grace.

WLC Q. 58. How do we come to be made partakers of the benefits which Christ hath procured?
A. We are made partakers of the benefits which Christ hath procured, by the application of them unto us, which is the work especially of God the Holy Ghost.

"We must now see in what way we possess the blessings which God has bestowed on his only-begotten Son, not for His own private use, but to enrich poor and needy men. First, 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. Therefore, to share with us what he has received from the Father, he had to become ours and dwell within us. **For this reason, he is called "our Head"**, and the first-born among many brethren. We also, in turn, are said to be **ingrafted into him** and clothed with him. For, as I have said, all that He possesses is nothing to us until **we become one with him**. And although it is true that we obtain this by faith, yet since we see that not all indiscriminately embrace that communion with Christ which is offered through the gospel, reason itself teaches us to ascend higher, and inquire into the secret efficacy of the Spirit, by which we come to enjoy Christ and all His benefits." – John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 3.1.1

Calvin's point: The secret efficacy of the Spirit, by which He unites us to Christ, is the only way we are brought into possession of all the benefits of redemption which flow from the work of Christ.

I. Defining our Mystical Union with Christ

"Union with Christ is a very inclusive subject. It embraces the wide span of salvation from the ultimate source in the eternal election of God to its final fruition in the glorification of the elect." – John Murray, *Redemption Accomplished and Applied*

"The mystical union is that intimate, vital, and spiritual union between Christ and His people, in virtue of which He is the source of their life and strength, of their blessedness and salvation." – Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*

- **Multiple Dimensions of our Union with Christ**

Thomas Goodwin sees “A threefold distinction of our union with Christ”

1. **Immanent Union** – That union in which God set His eternal love on us in Christ, out of which he chose us, and designed all the blessings and benefit of Christ to be ours. (Eph. 1:3-4)
2. **Transient Union** – That we were united with Christ in the work of His death in our stead and resurrection into a new life. (Rom 6:3-11)
3. **Applicatory Union** - That union by which the Spirit applies the work of Christ to us personally, calling us out of the darkness of our death into Christ’s life. In this application begins the process of regeneration, conversion, justification, adoption, sanctification... unto glorification. (Eph. 2:5-6)

- **Fivefold Distinction of our Union**

- a. **Eternal union**

Murry says our union with Christ spans from our election in eternity past to our glorification in eternity future. There is, therefore, an eternal aspect to that union. We are eternally loved and accepted of God “in Christ”. In the same way that humanity was “in Adam” before Adam’s human offspring ever existed, so redeemed humanity was “in Christ” before any of us were ever engrafted in time into His body, the church.

Ephesians 1:3-4, Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places, even as he chose us **in him** before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and blameless before him.

- b. **Incarnational Union - Incarnation of Christ**

As Christ became incarnate, He was united to our nature in which He suffered and died. In that death we were crucified with Him as our Head.

Romans 6:5-8, For if we have been **united with him** in a death like his, we shall certainly be **united with him** in a resurrection like his. We know that our old self was crucified **with him** in order that the body of sin might be brought to nothing, so that we would no longer be enslaved to sin. For one who has died has been set free from sin. Now if we have died with Christ, we believe that we will also live **with him**.

This dimension of union focuses on the value of our forensic or legal union by which we are justified. Out of this union flows the next two dimensions which are transformative in nature -the union of our engrafting and the union of Christ's indwelling.

c. Engrafted Union - Engrafted into Christ

We are engrafted into Christ by the Spirit. Prior to that time, we were not in Christ in this tangible sense, but rather, children of wrath. It is the work of the Spirit not only to eternally unite, but to tangibly unite each of us to Christ, as He effectually calls us into that union and enables us to participate in the life of Christ and all the benefits of that life.

Ephesians 2:1-6, And you were dead in the trespasses and sins in which you once walked, following the course of this world, following the prince of the power of the air, the spirit that is now at work in the sons of disobedience—among whom we all once lived in the passions of our flesh, carrying out the desires of the body and the mind, and were by nature children of wrath, like the rest of mankind. But God, being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which he loved us, even when we were dead in our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ—by grace you have been saved—and raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus.

d. Indwelling Union - Christ living in us

We are engrafted into Christ, but Christ is living in us.

Galatians 2:20, It is no longer I that live, but Christ who lives in me.

e. Bodily Union - Communion of all members in one body

In our union with Christ there is a communion of saints. For we are all one in Him, as members of His body.

Ephesians 4:15-16, Rather, speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in every way **into him** who is the head, into Christ, from whom the whole body, joined and held together by every joint with which it is equipped, when each part is working properly, makes the body grow so that it builds itself up in love.

- **Union** – A oneness that is pictured for us in scripture using several human analogies. This oneness has a legal or forensic dimension to it. For the guilty are declared righteous because they are in Christ. But it is not only a legal union. It is a spiritual union of oneness as well.
- **Mystical** – Paul says, when using the marriage analogy: “this is a mystery, but I am speaking of Christ and His church.” (Eph. 5:32) There is a mystical aspect to our union. And even the analogies of scripture do not fully convey the transcendence of this union.

“The technical designation of this union in theological language is ‘mystical,’ because it so far transcends all the analogies of earthly relationships, in the intimacy of its connection, in the transforming power of its influence, and in the excellence of its consequences.” – A. A. Hodge, *Outlines of Theology*

II. Biblical Analogies of our Mystical Union

- A vine and its branches

John 15:4-8, Abide in me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit by itself, unless it abides in the vine, neither can you, unless you abide in me. I am the vine; you are the branches. Whoever abides in me and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit, for apart from me you can do nothing. If anyone does not abide in me he is thrown away like a branch and withers; and the branches are gathered, thrown into the fire, and burned. If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be done for you. By this my Father is glorified, that you bear much fruit and so prove to be my disciples.

In this analogy we see a dependence of life and vitality flowing from Christ to all who are His.

- The head of a body and its members

Ephesians 4:11-16, And he gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the shepherds and teachers, to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, until we all attain to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to mature manhood, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ, so that we may no longer be children, tossed to and fro by the waves and carried about by every wind of doctrine, by human cunning, by craftiness in deceitful schemes. Rather, speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ, from whom the whole body, joined and held together by every joint with which it is equipped, when each part is working properly, makes the body grow so that it builds itself up in love.

1 Corinthians 12:12-20, For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ. For in one Spirit we were all baptized into one body—Jews or Greeks, slaves or free—and all were made to drink of one Spirit. For the body does not consist of one member but of many. If the foot should say, “Because I am not a hand, I do not belong to the body,” that would not make it any less a part of the body. And if the ear should say, “Because I am not an eye, I do not belong to the body,” that would not make it any less a part of the body. If the whole body were an eye, where would be the sense of hearing? If the whole body were an ear, where would be the sense of smell? But as it is, God arranged the members in the body, each one of them, as he chose. If all were a single member, where would the body be? As it is, there are many parts, yet one body.

In this analogy we see an interdependent symphony between the individual members of the body, with all resting in dependence upon the Head.

- A foundation and its building of stones

1 Peter 2:1-5, So put away all malice and all deceit and hypocrisy and envy and all slander. Like newborn infants, long for the pure spiritual milk, that by it you may grow up into salvation— if indeed you have tasted that the Lord is good. As you come to him, a living stone rejected by men but in the sight of God chosen and precious, you yourselves like living stones are being built up as a spiritual house, to be a holy priesthood, to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ.

In this analogy we see a completeness, a wholeness to the divine purpose of creating a temple of eternal worship to the glory of God in Christ.

- A man and his wife

Ephesians 5:25-32, Husbands, love your wives, as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her, that he might sanctify her, having cleansed her by the washing of water with the word, so that he might present the church to himself in splendor, without spot or wrinkle or any such thing, that she might be holy and without blemish. In the same way husbands should love their wives as their own bodies. He who loves his wife loves himself. For no one ever hated his own flesh, but nourishes and cherishes it, just as Christ does the church, because we are members of his body. “Therefore a man shall leave his father and mother and hold fast to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh.” This mystery is profound, and I am saying that it refers to Christ and the church.

In this analogy we see a oneness. The two become one flesh.

III. The importance of our Mystical Union with Christ

It is not too much to say that our union with Christ is the most important practical doctrine to the child of God. For **in Christ** “are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge.” (Col. 2:3) Our life is now hidden in Him. “When Christ who is our life shall appear, then shall we also appear with Him in glory.” (Col. 3:3)

A few verses that rest upon this truth.

Romans 6:5-6, For if we have been united with him in a death like his, we shall certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his. We know that our old self was crucified with him in order that the body of sin might be brought to nothing, so that we would no longer be enslaved to sin.

2 Corinthians 5:17, Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come.

Romans 8:10, But if Christ is in you, although the body is dead because of sin, the Spirit is life because of righteousness.

Galatians 2:20, I have been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me.

Colossians 1:24-27, Now I rejoice in my sufferings for your sake, and in my flesh I am filling up what is lacking in Christ's afflictions for the sake of **his body, that is, the church**, of which I became a minister according to the stewardship from God that was given to me for you, to make the word of God fully known, the mystery hidden for ages and generations but now revealed to his saints. To them God chose to make known how great among the Gentiles are the riches of the glory of this mystery, which is **Christ in you**, the hope of glory.

Everything about the Christian life is tied to this union. Every Sunday when we partake of the supper, we commune with God because we are united with Christ as He is the One who is seated in the heavenly places. and He has “raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus.” (Eph. 2:6) Christ united Himself with our humanity so that we might be united to God.

“For this is the very design of the gospel, that Christ may become ours, and that we may be ingrafted into his body.” – John Calvin

We are united with Christ and therefore, united with all which He has accomplished for us. He has taken all which we have committed against God upon Himself, to bear our rebellion, to bear the sin and the sorrow in our place. We cannot spend our lives wearing the mantle of our fallenness, for He has taken it upon Himself, to give us new life. And if we are in Him, then along with Paul, we must say: “It is no longer I who do it but sin that dwells in me.” “For it is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me.” And, “There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.” For:

- in Him our sins have been crucified,
- in Him we have died,
- in Him we have been forgiven,
- in Him we have been raised to a new life,
- in Him we are new creations,
- in Him we are holy, and brought into communion with a holy God,
- in Him we have been blessed with every spiritual blessing,
- in Him we are sons and daughters of God

Christ lives His new creation life in us, not to be weighed down by our sin, or the guilt of our sin. For the power of its dominion over us has ended and its sentence has been absolved in His death.

IV. The Agent of our Union with Christ—the Spirit

WLC Q. 59. Who are made partakers of redemption through Christ?

A. Redemption is certainly applied, and effectually communicated, to all those for whom Christ hath purchased it; who are in time by the Holy Ghost enabled to believe in Christ according to the gospel.

The Spirit places us into union with Christ our Redeemer. Just as essential as Christ’s work of accomplishing redemption is, so is the Spirit’s work of uniting each of us to that work.

Tangible reality to our union

- We are born into the life of Christ by the Spirit (Jn. 3:5-8)
- We are nurtured in the life of Christ by the Spirit (Rom. 8:14&15)
- We are conformed to the image of Christ by the Spirit (Rom. 8:26-29)
- We commune in the life of Christ with God and with each other by the Spirit (Eph. 4:4-6)
- Our bodies are raised incorruptible into the life of Christ by the Spirit (1 Cor. 15:35-45)

We have already seen in Q&A 58, *it is especially the work of the Holy Spirit* to make us partakers of the benefits Christ has procured for us, by applying them to us. The Spirit does this through bringing us into this tangible union with Christ as He calls us out of darkness into the life of the Son.

John 14:18-23, “I will not leave you as orphans; **I will come to you**. Yet a little while and the world will see me no more, but you will see me. **Because I live, you also will live**. In that day you will know **that I am in my Father, and you in me, and I in you**. Whoever has my commandments and keeps them, he it is who loves me. And he who loves me will be loved by my Father, and I will love him and **manifest myself to him**.” Judas (not Iscariot) said to him, “Lord, how is it that you will manifest yourself to us, and not to the world?” Jesus answered him, “If anyone loves me, he will keep my word, and my Father will love him, and **we will come to him and make our home with him**.”

Christ lives in us by the Spirit. We participate in the communion between the Trinity, individually and as Christ’s body, the church.

“Our union with Christ, our participation of him, consists in the inhabitation of the same Spirit in him and us, and the first (primary) work of this Spirit given unto us, bestowed upon us, is **to form Christ in us**, whereby our union is completed.” – John Owen

“So that Spirit which is - in Him, a full running over fountain, dropping down and being also infused in us, unites us unto him; yea, that very Spirit communicated to me in some measure, which is in him in such fullness, that Spirit which doth ties me as fast unto Christ as any joint ties member to member . . .” – Richard Sibbes

V. Our Tangible Entrance into Union with Christ – the Effectual Call

This is the Spirit’s indispensable work, and He effects this tangible participation through the effectual call,

WLC Q. 66. What is that union which the elect have with Christ?

A. The union which the elect have with Christ is the work of God’s grace, whereby they are spiritually and mystically, yet really and inseparably, joined to Christ as their head and husband; which is done in their effectual calling.

- The Spirit’s call is not a request God lays before us. Neither is it a pleading on God’s part to evoke a change of mind. Rather it is an effectual transference enacted by the power of the Spirit’s grace.

It is the Spirit’s effectual call which “delivers us from the domain of darkness and transfers us into this kingdom of the beloved Son.” (Col. 1:13)

Romans 8:30, For those whom he predestined he also called, and those whom he called he also justified, and those whom he justified he also glorified.

Or as Peter says, when speaking of the church:

1 Peter 2:9, But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession, that you may proclaim the excellencies of him **who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light**.

To rightly communicate the idea of God's effectual call, it is important to use the term accurately. When a loved one passes away, we commonly say that God "called" that person home. Although God certainly invites this saint into the heavenly home prepared for him, we do not think of this calling home as **simply an invitation** in which God says He wants a person to die and come to heaven if He can convince them to do so. No, it is an effectual transference divinely determined to move a person from this life to the next.

It is in this same sense that God calls us who are spiritually dead into life by His divine determination to effectually transfer us from the realm of death into the living. He calls the dead into life just as He calls the living into His bosom at death.

- Biblical analogies of this calling
 - a. a drawing unto Christ, (Jn. 6:44)
 - b. a being taught of God, (Jn. 6:45, Is. 54:13)
 - c. a heart transplant, (Ezek. 36:26, Jer. 31:33)
 - d. a spiritual resurrection, (Eph. 2:5&6)
 - e. a calling out of darkness into light, (2 Cor. 4:6)
 - f. a new birth into the spiritual realm or kingdom of Christ, (Jn. 3:3-7)

Each of these varying pictures have the same thread in common. The **call is an efficacious work** determined by the one issuing the call, the Spirit of God. And so, in this sense it is wholly different than the **external call of the gospel** to faith. The external call is to go out to all. For it is the duty of all men everywhere to repent and believe the gospel. But the internal call by the Spirit is only given to God's elect. It is an individual summons issued to each and every one of the elect at God's appointed time. And when this summons is issued, the elect hear His voice and come.

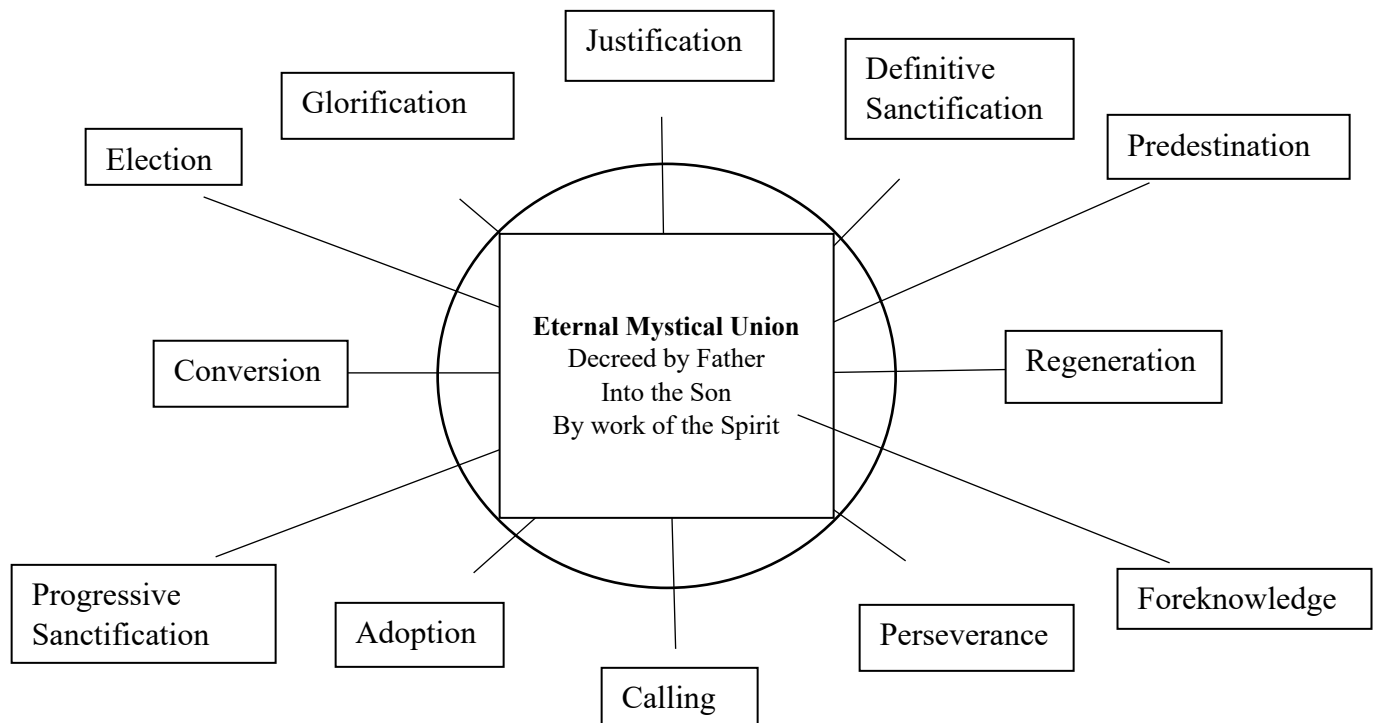
IV. Our union with Christ is the seedbed of all our bestowed benefits of grace

Question 69 of the Larger Catechism opens the door for next week's lesson. It deals with the covenant benefits which flow from our union with Christ.

WLC Q. 69. What is the communion in grace which the members of the invisible church have with Christ?

A. The communion in grace which the members of the invisible church have with Christ, is their partaking of the virtue of his mediation, in their justification, adoption, sanctification, and whatever else, in this life, **manifests their union with him.**

- Our union with Christ confers our communion in the graces He affords us.
- Those graces are the manifestation of that union



What is at the center from which all these benefits of Christ's work flow? It is the union which we are brought into with Christ by the activity of the Spirit of God. From this union with Christ as our head, all that is His communicates to us.

Suggested Further Reading on The Work of Christ

“The Mystical Union” by Louis Berkhof

“William Perkins on Union with Christ and Justification” by J. V. Fesko

Redemption Accomplished and Applied by John Murray

Readings for Next Class

Westminster Confession of Faith, Chapter 10, 14, 15

WLC 12-13, 30-31, 67-68, 72, 76

WSC 31, 85-87

Horton, 245-270

Additional Readings for Next Class on Election, Effectual Calling, and Regeneration

“Faith and Repentance” in *Redemption Accomplished and Applied* by John Murray