

All Elaborated: Union

This, too, is a vital new-covenant concept, but, I fear, one which is but poorly understood by most believers today.¹ Moreover, in a day like ours, when doctrine is at such a low premium, I see little hope on the horizon for a recovery of biblical teaching on the subject. And, it has to be emphasised, it is the felt-experience of any doctrine which is paramount. Never more so than with the believer's union with Christ. I hope I can hope that God might make use of this work to arouse some believers – not excluding myself! – to a deeper appreciation of the spiritual union of Christ with his people.²

I said that union is a vital topic of the new covenant, but this is not good enough. I ought to go further. If we had to choose one word to capture the over-riding theme of the post-Pentecost Scriptures, 'union' – the believer's union with Christ – might well be considered the most suitable. After all, we have been plainly told what God's purpose was in planning, accomplishing and applying the redemption of his elect:

We know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose. For those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, in order that he might be the firstborn among many brothers. And those whom he

¹ Witness D.Martyn Lloyd-Jones' answer when he was asked when he was going to preach through Romans: 'When I understand Romans 6', was his reply. As he later observed, he found the hymnbook at Westminster Chapel totally inadequate on the subject of union with Christ. The best that most believers can come up with is 'fellowship with Christ'. This, while it is a precious truth, is woefully inadequate with regard to 'union'.

² For a highly-detailed exposition of this vital topic, see J.Scott Duval and J.Daniel Hays: *God's Relational Presence: The Cohesive Center of Biblical Theology*, Baker Academic, Grand Rapids, 2019, pp221-323.

predestined he also called, and those whom he called he also justified, and those whom he justified he also glorified (Rom. 8:28-30).

And herein lies a vital distinction. First and foremost, union with Christ is objective. But it is also subjective. Let me explain. I start with the objective. What was God's eternal purpose with regard to the elect? That they might be redeemed so that they might 'be conformed to the image of his Son, in order that he might be the firstborn among many brothers'. This, while it certainly speaks of the believer's duty, his responsibility to live in obedience under Christ's law so as to show a growing conformity to Christ – to 'grow in the grace and knowledge [experience (*ginōskō*)] of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ' (2 Pet. 3:18)³ – that is, the subjective – it primarily (see the context of Romans) speaks of the Father's eternal, sovereign, predestinating purpose to produce a people saved from their sins, conformed to his Son, transformed into his likeness by the Spirit, and all to the glory of the triune God. This – not the happiness of man – must be the constant mantra of the gospel. It is God's paramount purpose in the new covenant. As I say, the one word which captures it is 'union'. From eternity past to eternity future, God's purpose is to save his elect to form a people so united to Christ that they increasingly become transformed into a race of CHRISTians.⁴

And see how John regarded likeness to Christ as a huge source of confidence to the believer:

Whoever confesses that Jesus is the Son of God, God abides in him, and he in God... By this is love perfected with us, so that we may have confidence for the day of judgment, because as he is so also are we in this world (1 John 4:15,17).

³ Compare 'I never knew (*ginōskō*) you' (Matt. 7:23); 'now that you have come to know (*ginōskō*) God, or rather to be known (*ginōskō*) by God' (Gal. 4:9).

⁴ There is much more to be said about this important matter. I will return to it.

No wonder then that in his *Redemption Accomplished and Applied*, John Murray pointed out that union with Christ is ‘the central truth of the whole doctrine of salvation’. The phrase ‘in Christ’ occurs over two hundred times in Paul’s writings and more than twenty times in John’s.⁵ These facts lead me to repeat my sad observation that the union of Christ with his people is so little understood – or even thought about – highlights the poverty of doctrinal understanding and curiosity prevalent among believers.

I have just noted D.Martyn Lloyd-Jones’ observation about needing to get to grips with union with Christ. Later, in a sermon on:

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, so that in the coming ages he might show the immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus (Eph. 2:4-7)...

...he declared:

Here we are undoubtedly face-to-face with one of the greatest and most marvellous of all the Christian doctrines, one of the most glorious beyond any question at all... our union with Christ. It is a teaching that you find in many places... The fifth chapter of... Romans [for instance], which is in many ways the most extended statement of the doctrine to be found anywhere. But it is to be found in exactly the same way in the sixth chapter of... Romans. It is likewise found in 1 Corinthians 15... but it is seen equally clearly in 2 Corinthians... 5. Similarly it is the teaching found in... Galatians: ‘I am crucified with Christ: nevertheless I live; yet not I, but Christ lives in me: and the life which I now live in the flesh I live by the faith of the Son of God, who loved me, and gave himself for me’ (Gal. 2:20). This is the most wonderful and the most amazing thing of all, and to me it is always a matter of great surprise that this blessed

⁵ Gathered from Wikipedia.

doctrine should receive so little attention! For some reason or other, Christian people seem to be afraid of it... [Yet] according to this teaching in Ephesians 2 and elsewhere, you are not Christians at all unless you are joined to Christ and 'in him'.⁶

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Paul, in setting out the superiority of the new covenant over the old, put it this way:

Now the Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom. And we all, with unveiled face, beholding the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another. For this comes from the Lord who is the Spirit (2 Cor. 3:17-18).

Transformation into conformity to Christ, into the image of Christ, into Christ-likeness – union! That's the sum and substance of the effect of the gospel on sinners. Union is at the heart of the new covenant. No amount of assiduous church attendance, or proficiency in catechismal-repetition, or receiving heavy lashes of the Mosaic law,⁷ will do. Nothing but the power and grace of the Spirit can produce conformity to Christ. And without that conformity, no amount of profession carries conviction. Nothing less than progressive transformation into Christ-likeness is required, and this is possible only by the believer's union with Christ.

⁶ Sadly, Lloyd-Jones drew on Reformed covenant-theology to advance his argument.

⁷ This was one of the controlling features of the puritan ministry: not liking the consequences of Calvin's rubric about the wheat and the tares – which they had imbibed – and deploring the mixed churches inevitably produced by their infant-baptism-covenant-theology system, their mortification drove them to latch on to the only solution they could think of; namely, a liberal use of Calvin's whip of the law (see my *Christ; Infant; 'The Law and the Confessions'* in my *New-Covenant Articles Volume One*). Martin Luther had to face a similar problem in his conflict with the Anabaptists (see my *Battle*).

As for this primary question of ‘union’, there were two parts to Christ’s startling declaration in the upper room, the second of which was – and remains – even more startling than the first:

I am the true vine... I am the vine; you are the branches
(John 15:1,5).

That Christ is the true vine would seem to be something which we might – to a measure, begin to grasp – but that believers, united to Christ, form this vine with and in Christ... well, that seems to verge on the incredible. But that is precisely what Christ said is the nature of the new covenant. And not only that; look how Christ developed his point about union. To bring this out, let me quote the entire passage. Christ declared:

I am the true vine, and my Father is the vinedresser.⁸ Every branch in me that does not bear fruit he takes away, and every branch that does bear fruit he prunes, that it may bear more fruit. Already you are clean because of the word that I have spoken to you. 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. As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you. Abide in my love. If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love, just as I have kept my Father’s commandments and abide in his love. These things I have spoken to you, that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be full (John 15:1-11).

Let me underline the key phrases (besides the ones I have already spoken about): ‘every branch in me’; ‘abide in me,

⁸ Notice how this confirms the point just made: God is engaged in fulfilling his eternal purpose in saving sinners.

and I in you'; 'abides in'; 'abide in'; 'abides in me and I in him'; 'apart from me'; 'abide in me'; 'abide in me, and my words abide in you'; 'abide in my love'; 'abide in my love'; 'abide in'.⁹

Christ's repeated stress on 'abide' is remarkable. And let us be clear; 'abide' means 'continue, dwell, remain, remain united, inhabit', and all *in* Christ. The believer is in Christ, he lives in Christ, he dwells in him, he is to remain and continue in him, grow in him, bearing fruit in him, being united to him, being increasingly transformed into his likeness.

Why do I say that? In that passage, Christ stressed another word – one which I have hinted at in passing – 'fruit', bearing fruit, fruitfulness.¹⁰ It is a mere truism to say it, but the vine-keeper's purpose in planting a vine is that he might gather fruit. The Father is 'the vinedresser', and his purpose in saving his people and uniting them to Christ, is that they might bear fruit, the fruit of the Spirit (Gal. 5:16-25); that is, that they might be increasingly transformed into Christ's likeness (Rom. 8:28-30; 12:2; 2 Cor. 3:17-18; Eph. 4:12-16; Col. 3:10; 1 John 4:17).

All that Christ is, and all that Christ has done, in the eyes of God, the believer is and has. And it must – will – show in his life of Christ-likeness. Who can begin to take it in?

Matthew Poole had a go:

This our abiding in Christ is expounded, by an abiding in his words (John 15:7), by abiding in his love (John 15:10), an abiding in his Spirit (1 John 2:27), a walking as Christ walked (1 John 2:6), an abiding in the light (John 15:10), not sinning (1 John 3:6).

So did Augustus H. Strong. In his *Systematic Theology*, he delineated the nature of the believer's union with Christ as:

⁹ John latched on to *menō*, remain or abide; he used it forty times in his Gospel, twenty-seven times in his letters (see Duval and Hays p294).

¹⁰ 'Fruit' appears six times in that short passage.

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1. An organic union – in which believers become members of Christ and enjoy a mutual, reciprocal dependence on Christ for life, and he on them for expression of the union to the world (Eph. 5:29-30).
2. A vital union – in which Christ operates within believers as their life and becomes the dominating principle within them (Gal. 2:20; Col. 3:3-4).
3. A spiritual union – that is, a union originating from and sustained by the Holy Spirit in their spirit (Rom. 8:9-10; Eph 3:16-17).
4. An indissoluble union – that is, a union which, by virtue of Christ's eternal, divine, and incorruptible power and grace, can never be dissolved (Matt. 28:20; Rom. 8:39; Heb. 7:16).
5. An inscrutable union – that is, a divine and mystical union of knowledge-surpassing intimacy and value (Eph. 3:19; 5:32; Col. 1:27).¹¹

* * *

This was not the first time that Christ had broached the subject of the believer's union with himself, and this in association with the union within the Godhead. He had already spoken in these terms:

Whoever feeds on my flesh and drinks my blood abides in me, and I in him (John 6:56).

I and the Father are one... The Father is in me and I am in the Father (John 10:30,38).

Do you not believe that I am in the Father and the Father is in me? The words that I say to you I do not speak on my own authority, but the Father who dwells in me does his works (John 14:10).

You know [the Spirit of truth], for he dwells with you and will be [or, is] in you. 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

¹¹ Adapted from Wikipedia.

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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 (John 14:17-21).

And immediately following the upper room, Christ in his mediatorial prayer made a request which, to the disciples at the time must have seemed to be – and still to us must be – jaw-dropping: thinking of his people, the Son asked the Father:

...that they may be one, even as we are one... I do not ask for these only, but also for those who will believe in me through their word, that they may all be one, just as you, Father, are in me, and I in you, that they also may be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me. The glory that you have given me I have given to them, that they may be one even as we are one, I in them and you in me, that they may become perfectly one, so that the world may know that you sent me and loved them even as you loved me. Father, I desire that they also, whom you have given me, may be with me where I am, to see my glory that you have given me because you loved me before the foundation of the world. O righteous Father, even though the world does not know you, I know you, and these know that you have sent me. I made known to them your name, and I will continue to make it known, that the love with which you have loved me may be in them, and I in them (John 17:11,20-26).

Wow! The three persons of the Godhead all involved in union with the believer! Think of that!

And such a spiritual union must inevitably have a vital consequence, one, as I will later argue,¹² is rapidly being lost sight of today: believers are separate from the world, and have to be separate from the world. As Christ said in his great prayer:

I have given [my disciples] your word, and the world has hated them because they are not of the world, just as I am not of the world. I do not ask that you take them out of the

¹² In many of my works, I have already tried to make the same point.

world, but that you keep them from the evil one. They are not of the world, just as I am not of the world. Sanctify [that is, separate] them in the truth; your word is truth. As you sent me into the world, so I have sent them into the world. And for their sake I consecrate [that is, separate] myself, that they also may be sanctified [that is separated] in truth (John 17:14-19).

This ‘separation’ speaks of being drawn out from the world, set apart from the world, and devoted, dedicated to God. ‘The saints’, scripturally speaking, are ‘the sanctified or separated ones’, called out of the world into union in and with Christ. Forget the rubbish taught by Rome! Christendom may be able to pronounce certain people ‘saints’, but only God, by the Holy Spirit, can take unregenerate sinners and make them to be ‘sanctified in Christ Jesus, called to be saints’ (1 Cor. 1:2).¹³

Union – union of believers with Christ, union of believers with each other in Christ, in union with the Father, and all by the Spirit – this spiritual union is, as I have emphasised, a major and repeated theme of the new covenant. It is, as we have seen, God’s eternal purpose. And it is illustrated, not only by the vine (as Christ in the upper room), but in several other ways also. It seems that the Spirit so wanted to get this particular nail driven home that he piled illustration upon illustration. For instance, the spiritual union of believers with Christ and each other is likened to a family (Rom. 8:14-16; Ga. 4:6-7; Eph. 2:18-19; 1 Tim. 3:15; Heb. 2:10-13; 12:5-11),¹⁴ a temple (1 Cor. 3:10-11,16-17; 2 Cor. 6:14-18; Eph. 2:18-22; 1 Pet. 2:4-6,9), a body, one with Christ (Rom. 12:4-5; 1 Cor. 12:12-27),¹⁵ to a flock with Christ as shepherd

¹³ To take but one verse.

¹⁴ Scripture frequently speaks of believers as ‘brothers and sisters’ (Matt. 23:8; Acts 1:14-16; Rom. 1:13; 8:29; 14:10,13,15,21; 1 Cor. 5:11; Eph. 6:23; 1 Thess. 1:4; 1 Tim. 6:2; Rev. 19:10, for instance), members of a family. Of course, in certain circumstances, *adelphoi* can mean males, but it can also mean both male and female.

¹⁵ Duval and Hayes: ‘This is much more than saying that the church [*ekklēsia*] is a group or body of believers. [Believers] are united to

(Matt. 26:31; Luke 12:32; John 10:1-16; 21:15-17; Acts 20:28-29; Heb. 13:20; 1 Pet. 5:2-4; Rev. 7:17),¹⁶ and to marriage (Eph. 5:25-32).

Phew!

In a remarkably blunt statement, Paul linked the concepts of a body and the temple:

Do you not know that your bodies are members of Christ? Shall I then take the members of Christ and make them members of a prostitute? Never! Or do you not know that he who is joined to a prostitute becomes one body with her? For, as it is written: ‘The two will become one flesh’. But he who is joined to the Lord becomes one spirit with him. Flee from sexual immorality. Every other sin a person commits is outside the body, but the sexually immoral person sins against his own body. Or do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you, whom you have from God? You are not your own, for you were bought with a price. So glorify God in your body (1 Cor. 6:15-20).

But let me say a little more about the picture of a building; specifically, a holy building, a temple – the spiritual, new-covenant fulfilment of the shadow, Solomon’s temple.¹⁷ The

Christ in such a way as to be described as “the body of Christ”, where each person [that is, each believer] is a part of it (1 Cor. 12:7)... Believers are “members of his body” (Eph. 5:30) or “parts of his body” (1 Cor. 12:12,20)’ (Duval and Hayes p243).

¹⁶ Once again, echoes of the prophets (Isa. 63:11; Jer. 13:17; 31:10; 50:17; Ezek. 34:11-24; Mic. 2:12-13; 7:14; Zech. 9:16; 10:3), with clear references to the exodus, return from captivity, and the setting up of the new covenant under Christ.

¹⁷ Interestingly, the writer of Hebrews, though he more than any other inspired penman set out the way Christ fulfilled the old-covenant shadows, never mentioned the temple. He was strong on the tabernacle (I make it ten references), but no mention of the temple; the tabernacle was closer to the exodus, and connected with Israel’s consequent wandering, of course. Even so, he never referred to the temple. Nevertheless, the writer did speak of believers as God’s house, with Christ reigning over them (Heb. 3:1-6; 10:19-22).

temple, after all, played a dominant role in the old covenant.¹⁸ *And so it does in the new covenant – but in a spiritual sense, of course.*¹⁹

When he came to write his first letter, Peter, having by the Spirit come to a proper understanding of the union of believers in and with Christ, while he took great care to preserve the essential concept of union, he changed the figure Christ used; Peter switched from the vine to the temple. Moreover, he expanded on his Master's doctrine by telling his readers:

As you come to [Christ], 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. For it stands in Scripture: 'Behold, I am laying in Zion a stone, a cornerstone, chosen and precious, and whoever believes in him will not be put to shame'... 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 marvellous light (1 Pet. 2:4-6,9).

Clearly, as I have already noted, Peter had felt the impact of Christ's words in the parable of the Tenants:

The stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone... Everyone who falls on that stone will be broken to pieces, and when it falls on anyone, it will crush him (Luke 20:17-18).²⁰

¹⁸ See my 'The Temple and the New Covenant' in my *New-Covenant Articles Volume Seven*.

¹⁹ This has been ruined by Christendom's talk of 'a sacred building', 'a house of God', 'a sanctuary', and the like. 'Going to church' has utterly ruined the concept of the *ekklēsia* as a body or a house.

²⁰ The illustration appears widely in Scripture (Ps. 118:22-23; Isa. 8:14; 28:16; Matt. 21:42; Luke 20:17-18; Acts 4:11; Rom. 9:22-23; Eph. 2:20; 1 Pet. 2:4-8), and in closely associated allusions (1 Cor. 3:11).

So much so, again as we have seen, he had already referred to it his discourse to the Jews (Acts 4:8-12). And now in his first letter.

And what about his second letter? He certainly reached new heights by the time he wrote:

[God's] divine power has granted to us all things that pertain to life and godliness, through the knowledge of him who called us to his own glory and excellence, by which he has granted to us his precious and very great promises, so that through them you may become partakers of the divine nature (2 Pet. 1:3-4).

'Partakers of the divine nature'! Wow!²¹

Paul also expanded on the temple as an illustration of union:

For through [Christ] we both [that is, both Jewish and Gentile believers] have access in one Spirit to the Father. So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are fellow-citizens with the saints and members of the household of God, built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus himself being the cornerstone, in whom the whole structure, being joined together, grows into a holy temple in the Lord. In him you also are being built together into a dwelling place for God by the Spirit (Eph. 2:18-22).

As he told the Corinthians, all this (as Christ had promised) was by the Spirit using the apostles:

You are God's field, God's building. According to the grace of God given to me, like a skilled master-builder I laid a foundation, and someone else is building upon it. Let each one take care how he builds upon it. For no one can lay a

²¹ In saying this, I am most decidedly not going down the 'deification' route adopted by the Finnish/Orthodox school (see James K. Beilby & Paul Rhodes Eddy (eds): *Justification: Five Views*, IVP Academic, Downers Grove, 2011). For John Calvin's rebuttal of Osiander on this, see John Calvin: *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, James Clarke and Co., Limited, London, 1957, Vol.2 pp40-51.

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foundation other than that which is laid, which is Jesus Christ (1 Cor. 3:9-11).

Taking the figure even further, believers, individually, said the apostle, are the new, true temple of God.

Do you not know that you [believers] are God's temple and that God's Spirit dwells in you? If anyone destroys God's temple, God will destroy him. For God's temple is holy, and you are that temple (1 Cor. 3:16-17).

Do not be unequally yoked with unbelievers. For what partnership has righteousness with lawlessness? Or what fellowship has light with darkness? What accord has Christ with Belial? Or what portion does a believer share with an unbeliever? What agreement has the temple of God with idols? For we are the temple of the living God; as God said: 'I will make my dwelling among them and walk among them, and I will be their God, and they shall be my people. Therefore go out from their midst, and be separate from them, says the Lord, and touch no unclean thing; then I will welcome you, and I will be a father to you, and you shall be sons and daughters to me, says the Lord Almighty' (2 Cor. 6:14-18).

In saying this, Paul had in mind temple restrictions. Gentiles were not allowed into the inner courts of the temple (Ezek. 44:7-9), and he himself had been assaulted on the mistaken ground that he had broken this prohibition (Acts 21:28): only the priests had access to the temple (2 Chron. 23:6), and that with imposed limits (Heb. 9:7; Lev. 16:2, 12, 14, 15).

The presence of God among and with and in his people in the new covenant is illustrated by Israel's exodus from Egypt. God had promised:

I will walk among you and will be your God, and you shall be my people. I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, that you should not be their slaves. And I have broken the bars of your yoke and made you walk erect (Lev. 26:12-13).

And with the restoration of Judah, he repeated that promise:

Behold, I will gather them from all the countries to which I drove them in my anger and my wrath and in great indignation. I will bring them back to this place, and I will make them dwell in safety. And they shall be my people, and I will be their God. I will give them one heart and one way, that they may fear me forever, for their own good and the good of their children after them. I will make with them an everlasting covenant, that I will not turn away from doing good to them. And I will put the fear of me in their hearts, that they may not turn from me. I will rejoice in doing them good, and I will plant them in this land in faithfulness, with all my heart and all my soul (Jer. 32:37-41).

So, in the new covenant:

My dwelling place shall be with them, and I will be their God, and they shall be my people (Ezek. 37:27).

With Christ's fulfilment of the old covenant, the old temple became defunct, and in AD70 it was destroyed, all in accordance with Christ's promise:

Jesus left the temple and was going away, when his disciples came to point out to him the buildings of the temple. But he answered them: 'You see all these, do you not? Truly, I say to you, there will not be left here one stone upon another that will not be thrown down' (Matt. 24:1-2).

The new-covenant replacement of that temple – the old having been superseded by Christ – is now to be found in his redeemed people, by his Spirit; this is the new, true temple of the new covenant. The *ekklēsia* is the 'house of God', erected on the sole foundation of the person and work of Christ as set out by the apostles. This community is made up of individual believers each indwelt by the Holy Spirit (1 Cor. 3:9-11, 16-17; 6:19-20; 12:12-13; 2 Cor. 6:14-18; Eph. 2:18-22; 1 Pet. 2:4-10). This is where God dwells today, dwelling in a spiritual sense in and among his people. Thus the old-covenant shadow – that God was specially present in the midst of his people in the tabernacle and then the temple (Ex. 29:44-46; 33:14-16; Ps. 114:2; Matt. 23:21) – is actually, really, fulfilled in Christ by his Spirit in his *ekklēsia* (Luke 10:23-24; 24:44; Acts 3:18; 1 Pet. 1:10-12). Consequently,

the *ekklēsia*, as God's 'dwelling', must be 'set apart for its sacred purpose' – such obedience bringing about the glorious promise that God will be the Father of his people (Isa. 52:11; Ezek. 20:33-41), and dwell among them, ruling them by his appointed King (2 Sam. 7:12-16; 2 Chron. 13:5; Ps. 89:20-37; Ezek. 37:24-28; 43:7-9; Zech. 2:10-11); that is, Christ himself (Matt. 12:3-6; Mark 14:58; John 2:19-21; Heb. 10:19-20).²²

But it was in Romans where Paul set out the definitive argument about the believer's spiritual union with Christ:

Do you not know that all of us who have been [spiritually] baptised into Christ Jesus were [spiritually] baptised into his death? We were buried therefore with him by [spiritual] baptism into death, in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life. 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 (Rom. 6:3-5).²³

And, as the apostle never tired of explaining, consequent upon their personal and individual union with Christ, each and every believer is in spiritual union with all his/her fellow-believers, in and by the Spirit:

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 [spiritually] baptised 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... Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it. (1 Cor. 12:12-14,27).²⁴

In Christ Jesus you are all sons of God, through faith. For as many of you as were [spiritually] baptised into Christ have

²² See my 'No Mixture' on my sermonaudio.com page.

²³ For the reasons behind my explanations, see my *Baptist; Infant; Hinge; Luther*.

²⁴ See the previous note. Paul's argument in 1 Corinthians 14 can be thought of in terms of the body.

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put on Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is no male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus (Gal. 3:26-28).²⁵

[The Father of glory] put all things under [Christ's] feet and gave him as Head over all things to the church, which is his body, the fullness of him who fills all in all (Eph. 1:22-23).

In Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ. For he himself is our peace, who has made us both [that is, Jew and Gentile] one and has broken down in his flesh the dividing wall of hostility by abolishing the law of commandments expressed in ordinances, that he might create in himself one new man in place of the two, so making peace, and might reconcile us both to God in one body through the cross, thereby killing the hostility (Eph. 2:13-16).

...the mystery of Christ... was not made known to the sons of men in other generations as it has now been revealed to his holy apostles and prophets by the Spirit. This mystery is that the Gentiles are fellow-heirs, members of the same body, and partakers of the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel (Eph. 3:4-6).

In [Christ] all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, making peace by the blood of his cross... In [Christ] the whole fullness of deity dwells bodily, and you [believers] have been filled in him, who is the Head of all rule and authority... [Believers are to remain] holding fast to the Head, from whom the whole body, nourished and knit together through its joints and ligaments, grows with a growth that is from God (Col. 1:19-20; 2:9-10,19).

Let me put this teaser to you: where did Paul first come across the idea of Christ's union with his people? It may be somewhat surprising to recall that it was very early in his personal experience of Christ – at the very start of his spiritual life, on the road outside Damascus, no less! You remember Christ's challenge to him, even as he was prostrate on the ground:

²⁵ See the previous note.

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Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?... I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting (Acts 9:4-5).

Paul, of course, knew that he had never met Christ before that moment; but he – as Saul – had been at the forefront of the ‘great persecution against the church’ which had been unleashed with the death of Stephen (Acts 8:1):

Saul was ravaging the church, and entering house after house, he dragged off men and women and committed them to prison (Acts 8:3).

Indeed, it was his hatred of believers that had taken Saul to Damascus in the first place:

Saul... breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord, went to the high priest and asked him for letters to the synagogues at Damascus, so that if he found any belonging to the Way, men or women, he might bring them bound to Jerusalem (Acts 9:1-2).

And we know his motive:

I was advancing in Judaism beyond many of my own age among my people, so extremely zealous was I for the traditions of my fathers (Gal. 1:14).

In short, as he repeatedly testified:

I am a Jew, born in Tarsus in Cilicia, but brought up in this city [that is, Jerusalem], educated at the feet of Gamaliel according to the strict manner of the law of our fathers, being zealous for God as all of you are this day. I persecuted this Way to the death, binding and delivering to prison both men and women, as the high priest and the whole council of elders can bear me witness. From them I received letters to the brothers, and I journeyed toward Damascus to take those also who were there and bring them in bonds to Jerusalem to be punished (Acts 22:3-5).

I persecuted the church of God (1 Cor. 15:9).

I persecuted the church of God violently and tried to destroy it (Gal. 1:13).

And yet Christ quite distinctly said:

Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?... I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting (Acts 9:4-5).

Paul, his mind as sharp as a razor, quick on the uptake, got the point at once. And he never forgot it: Christ and his people are one. To persecute the saints is to persecute the Christ. 'I have persecuted believers; I have, therefore, persecuted Christ himself'.

The other disciples had met this some time before. When speaking about the final judgment (Matt. 25), referring to God's final assessment of our works, Christ had made the point, and made it twice:

Truly, I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of these my brothers, you did it to me... Truly, I say to you, as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to me (Matt. 25:40,45).

Elsewhere,²⁶ I have tried to explore this profound matter of the spiritual union between Christ and his people in their justification. This union and justification was decreed and planned by God in eternity, accomplished by the life, death and resurrection of Christ, applied and made effective by the work of the Spirit. And the point at which God's decreed purpose and Christ's work become effective and actual in a sinner's experience is only at the point of faith. Until a sinner is regenerated, convicted, repents, turns to Christ and trusts the Saviour, he is not actually united to Christ. But the moment the sinner trusts the Redeemer, he is one with Christ.²⁷

With all this weight of teaching on union in light of the Father's eternal purpose, the Son's redeeming work in accomplishing that purpose, and the Spirit's application of

²⁶ See my *Eternal*.

²⁷ It is vital to distinguish between decreed union (which is from eternity) and actual union (which is at the point of faith). Hyper-Calvinists fail to preserve this distinction, this confusion proving disastrous for the preaching of the gospel. See my *Eternal*. I cannot overstate the importance of this comment.

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that work in fulfilling the purpose, it can therefore come as no surprise to find that Paul is passionate in urging believers to maintain unity with one another. Clearly, he saw that this is the only way to reflect Christ's clear insistence on mutual love among his spiritual brothers and sisters:

A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another: just as I have loved you, you also are to love one another. By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another (John 13:34-35).

Remember, Christ had insisted:

Be at peace with one another (Mark 9:50).

Echoes here of Joseph's warning to his brothers when they were going home to fetch their father and their families:

Do not quarrel on the way (Gen. 45:24).

Hence the apostle pressed believers:

Now to him who is able to do far more abundantly than all that we ask or think, according to the power at work within us, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, forever and ever. Amen. I therefore, a prisoner for the Lord, urge you to walk in a manner worthy of the calling to which you have been called, with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. There is one body and one Spirit – just as you were called to the one hope that belongs to your call – one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all (Eph. 3:20 – 4:6).²⁸

To break this union must constitute an offence of the first water to God.

None of this must be taken to mean that believers are peas in a pod.²⁹ That distinction belongs to the cults. No! Upon

²⁸ An appalling chapter division.

²⁹ All alike, virtual clones. When you've seen one, you've seen the lot.

conversion, believers retain their individuality. Moreover, as believers, each of them is individually gifted by Christ:

But grace was given to each one of us according to the measure of Christ's gift (Eph. 4:7).

Why does Christ give individual gifts to his people? As Paul explained, in the foundational days:

[Christ] gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the shepherds and teachers...

But why? For this reason:

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 (Eph. 4:11-16).

Notice, in addition to what we might call the leading, foundational gifts – apostles, prophets, and such like (1 Cor. 3:10; Eph. 2:20; Rev. 21:14) – Christ gifts each and every individual believer. And all for the building up of the one body.

The same may point be found in the apostle's first letter to Corinth. Have spoken at length about the oneness of the body, the apostle came to this:

There are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit; and there are varieties of service, but the same Lord; and there are varieties of activities, but it is the same God who empowers them all in everyone. To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good. For to one is given through

the Spirit the utterance of wisdom, and to another the utterance of knowledge according to the same Spirit, to another faith by the same Spirit, to another gifts of healing by the one Spirit, to another the working of miracles, to another prophecy, to another the ability to distinguish between spirits, to another various kinds of languages, to another the interpretation of languages. All these are empowered by one and the same Spirit, who apportions to each one individually as he wills (1 Cor. 12:4-11).

That there is some disagreement as to whether or not all these gifts are still within the *ekklēsia*, does not in any way alter the fact that Christ, by his Spirit, gifts individual believers for the common good:

Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it. And God has appointed in the church first apostles, second prophets, third teachers, then miracles, then gifts of healing, helping, administrating, and various kinds of languages. Are all apostles? Are all prophets? Are all teachers? Do all work miracles? Do all possess gifts of healing? Do all speak with languages? Do all interpret? But earnestly desire the higher gifts (1 Cor. 12:27-31).

And so on. In between those two extracts, Paul had spelled out an obvious home truth to the Corinthians, a truth which they were forgetting and so marring the oneness of the *ekklēsia*:

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 baptised 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

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chose. If all were a single member, where would the body be? As it is, there are many parts, yet one body.

The eye cannot say to the hand: 'I have no need of you', nor again the head to the feet: 'I have no need of you'. On the contrary, the parts of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable, and on those parts of the body that we think less honourable we bestow the greater honour, and our unpresentable parts are treated with greater modesty, which our more presentable parts do not require. But God has so composed the body, giving greater honour to the part that lacked it, that there may be no division in the body, but that the members may have the same care for one another. If one member suffers, all suffer together; if one member is honoured, all rejoice together (1 Cor. 12:12-26).

Is it not clear? All is for the edification of the *ekklēsia* in the promotion of unity, and this is to reflect God's eternal purpose in producing a people united in Christ and increasing in Christ's likeness.

As the apostle told the Romans:

For as in one body we have many members, and the members do not all have the same function, so we, though many, are one body in Christ, and individually members one of another. Having gifts that differ according to the grace given to us, let us use them: if prophecy, in proportion to our faith; if service, in our serving; the one who teaches, in his teaching; the one who exhorts, in his exhortation; the one who contributes, in generosity; the one who leads, with zeal; the one who does acts of mercy, with cheerfulness. Let love be genuine. Abhor what is evil; hold fast to what is good. Love one another with brotherly affection. Outdo one another in showing honour (Rom. 12:4-10).

And, as Peter told his readers:

Having purified your souls by your obedience to the truth unto a sincere brotherly love, love one another earnestly from a pure heart, since you have been born again, not of perishable seed but of imperishable, through the living and abiding word of God... Love the brotherhood (1 Pet. 1:22-23; 2:17).

And as the writer of Hebrews, when drawing to the end of his treatise on the superiority of the new covenant, put it succinctly:

Let brotherly love continue (Heb. 13:1).

I will close this chapter by an extract from my *Eternal Justification*:

God, because of his grace, on the basis of his grace, justifies, declares righteous in his sight, all those sinners who trust the merits, the person and the work of his Son, the Lord Jesus Christ. In other words, in the gospel, God does not merely declare the sinner righteous, arbitrarily, simply by decree. He certainly does not declare the sinner righteous contrary to fact. If he did that, he would be breaking his own law. No. God declares the sinner righteous by taking steps to ensure that the sinner *is* righteous, constituting him righteous – not in himself, needless to say, but in Christ. That is, God reckons and regards the sinner as righteous as Christ – not in himself, but in Christ. He does this by putting the righteousness of Christ to the sinner's account.

How can this be? Union with Christ. That is the answer. Union with Christ. This, it goes without saying, is a breathtaking thought, far beyond our ability to grasp. So much so, if it had not been revealed to us by God, we should never have dreamed of it ourselves; we could never have dreamed of it...

'God... made [Christ] who knew no sin, to be sin [or a sin offering, NIV footnote] for us, that we might become the righteousness of God in him' (2 Cor. 5:20-21). By Christ's righteous act, 'by one man's obedience', God constitutes, declares many righteous (Rom. 5:17-19). But this speaks of more than God reckoning the sin of his elect to Christ, and reckoning Christ's righteousness to them. Rather, Christ and the elect are one (Rom. 6:1-11, for instance). 'Do you not know that your bodies are members of Christ?... He who is joined to the Lord is one spirit with him' (1 Cor. 6:15-17). Believers are 'in Christ'. This phrase is no makeweight: it appears nearly 250 times in the New Testament, so

important is the concept.³⁰ Nor am I forgetting the corresponding ‘Christ in you’ (John 17:23; Rom. 8:10; Gal. 2:20; Eph. 3:17; Col. 1:27). To put it as plainly as I can: As Christ is to God, so are the believing elect.³¹ What Christ accomplished on their behalf, God declares to be fully theirs.

In short, in gospel justification by faith through union with Christ, we come up against something absolutely unique and astonishing. The sinner who is justified can say: ‘Christ is mine, and I am his. We are one. All that he is to God, I am. All that he has, is mine. He took all my sin. By his righteousness, I am accounted righteous. God sees me only in and through his Son. As God the Father regards his Son, so he regards me’. It *is* amazing. Truly! No wonder the hymn-writers, in describing it, have used expressions such as ‘amazing grace’, ‘I stand all amazed’, ‘the grace of God amazes me’, ‘grace – ’tis a charming sound’, ‘how free, how glorious is the grace’, ‘how wonderful the sovereign love’, ‘I am his, and he is mine’, and so on. Amazing! This is the very word to use when thinking of God’s plan for the justification of his elect through their union with Christ.

John Newton:

*Great God! From thee there’s nought concealed,
Thou seest my inward frame;
To thee I always stand revealed
Exactly as I am!*

*Since I can hardly therefore bear
What in myself I see,
How vile and dark must I appear
Most holy God, to thee!*

³⁰ The GNB translates ‘in Christ’ as ‘in union with Christ’. Excellent!

³¹ [As before,] in saying this, I am most decidedly not going down the ‘deification’ route adopted by the Finnish/Orthodox school (see James K.Beilby & Paul Rhodes Eddy (eds): *Justification: Five Views*, IVP Academic, Downers Grove, 2011). For John Calvin’s rebuttal of Osiander on this, see John Calvin: *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, James Clarke and Co., Limited, London, 1957, Vol.2 pp40-51.

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*But since my Saviour stands between
In garments dyed in blood,
'Tis he, instead of me, is seen,
When I approach to God.*

*Thus, though a sinner, I am safe;
He pleads before the throne
His life and death in my behalf,
And calls my sins his own.*

*What wondrous love, what mysteries
In this appointment shine!
My breaches of the law are his,
And his obedience mine.*

* * *

And this concludes a look at my selection of the many important new-covenant themes which Jesus covered in his discourse in the upper room. I stress the word ‘selection’. A fuller account would include humility and mutual service among believers (John 13:1-20), the assurance believers have concerning their protection in this life leading to eternal glory (John 14:1-14), the gift, work and help of the Holy Spirit (John 14:15-29; 15:26-27; 16:4-15), the world’s hatred of the *ekklēsia* (John 15:18-25; 16:1-4,16-24), and so on. All these themes are to be found in the upper-room episode. It was, as I have said, epoch-changing – both historically, and personally for the disciples and every believer since.