

## **Union with Christ** **John 15:1-4: Titus 3:3-8**

The Bible is a grand romance of Christ the Bridegroom uniting Himself to His bride, the church. There is no greater doctrine regarding salvation than the theme of the believer being united to Christ. Christians of every generation and tradition have thought and taught about this union with Christ. Before the Protestant Reformation, Roman Catholic theology being in union with Christ was fluid--you could be more or less united to Christ. Only through a person's penance or effort, could one hope to be united with Christ.

That is not how the Reformers thought of union with Christ. For them, there was an important difference between union (relationship) with Christ and communion (fellowship) with Christ. Communion with Christ, meaning the actual enjoyment of Christ is something that fluctuates in believers.

In Reformation thought, union with Christ is a fixed and stable thing, the solid foundation on which we can know lasting joy in Christ. The difference for the Reformers stemmed from their strong belief in the centrality of Christ. According to John Calvin, "It is indisputable. No one is loved by God apart from Christ." Ephesians 1:6

Calvin's point is that God does not have some quantity of love He tries to spread around among all the world's believers, which could leave you feeling, "Well, maybe God can't love me that much, He's got so many to love, and I might as well try to win His attention with a few works."

No, God gives all the fullness of His love to His Son, and from Him all that fullness pours down upon us. God loves believers with the unbounded, full love He has for His Son.

This is much different than the Roman Catholic position of the Christian life striving forward in the passionate hope of attaining union with Christ, Calvin saw the Christian life starting with union with Christ.

A key image from Scripture explaining this would be that of the vine from John 15.

Jesus Christ is the vine filled with the love and life of God, and unattached to Him we have no life in us, no spiritual life whatsoever. But ingrafted into Him, the vine, we have all the life and love He enjoys. Calvin said, "As soon as you become ingrafted into Christ through faith, you are made a son of God, an heir of heaven, a partaker in righteousness, a possessor of life. And you obtain not the opportunity to gain merit, you gain all the merits of Christ, for they are communicated (given) to you."

The Reformers saw that there is no gospel without union with Christ. This was the radical solution to the radical problem of our sin. Romans 5:12 There is a problem with our heart.

We were born in Adam and inherited his status and his inclinations. Because of this, to be united with Christ, we must be born again. This is better than having only our sins washed away; being one with Christ changes us. We now have a new status and new inclinations—those of Christ! Galatians 2:20 United to Him, then, we share His life and righteousness. They are credited to us. They are ours! That's how we can be justified through this union with Christ.

Roman Catholic theologians quickly criticized this as "flimsy legal fiction." "It makes no sense, they said, "because...what happens to the person's sin?" Calvin and the other Reformers thundered, "It is transferred to Christ!" How does this work? By Christ taking our sin upon Him!

If Christ takes our sin, and we take His righteousness because we're united with Him, all those difficulties that the Roman Catholic theologians proposed go away. In short, this great exchange works because Christ desires to make us one with Him.

Why is the rediscovery of this doctrine so important (and revolutionary)? Because we naturally have ourselves at the center of our own solar system. Christianity, we assume, must be all about how I'm doing.

The Reformation instead placed Christ at the center, and so it replaced fretful anxiety based on my own performance with stable joy based on Christ. Because instead now of asking, "How righteous am I?" I now ask, "How righteous is Christ?" and then I smile.

The critics of the Reformation rebutted, "This doctrine of imputation, of the great exchange, is nothing more than a doctrine of comfort. And that is the problem. This message is simply too comforting. If our anxieties about our guilt and our standing before God could be washed away so freely in Christ, what possible motivation is there for us to pursue lives of holiness?"

Calvin saw the problem with this argument. If you have the righteousness of Christ in you through the great exchange, then you have Christ's Spirit, the Holy Spirit in you, regenerating you, and your desire is now to live a life of holiness. You have been changed.

We don't seek union with Christ to receive some reward outside of Him. The great reward of union with Christ *is Christ*, knowing and enjoying Him. Here's the eternal life for which we've been saved.

Now the total freeness we have in Christ; this comfort of knowing that we are saved because we are united with Christ, doesn't mean that we ignore how we live. Romans 6:4

In Christ, we receive His righteousness and sonship. We receive His transforming life and spirit.

When we are united to Christ, we receive the Holy Spirit that transforms our heart and our thinking.

Martin Luther wrote, "Through faith in Christ, Christ's righteousness becomes our righteousness. All He has becomes ours or rather, He Himself becomes ours. United to Him, sharing His life, filled with His Spirit, we cannot but be transformed to be more like Him. And the new life, the new heart we've been given in Christ begins to show." 2 Corinthians 3:18

The biblical image of the vine is the clearest way to describe being united with Christ. Believers are depicted as being one with Christ who pours the life-giving sap of the Spirit into us, making us fruitful. It is transformative; we have a new heart, a new Spirit.

It is good for us to ponder our union with Christ regularly and often. For, all too easily, I forget that Christ has become my identity; I then think I am what I do.

So, while union with Christ immediately changes my status, it has deep, ongoing work to do in our lives.

Because when I forget my identity in Christ, things start going wrong in the Christian life.

When I'm doing well, I become proud and unbearable. When I'm not doing well, I curl up in defeated misery. Either way, when I forget my union with Christ and allow something else, my performance, success, failure to define me, I become ridiculous and dangerous.

But when I remember Christ defines believers, we find our identity in Him, then I find I'm much more immune to both pride and failure.

Because in Him I'm no failure at all but triumphant, and in Him what have I to be proud of but Him?