

Truths of the Reformation

(10) Union With Christ

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This morning we continue our series on the Truths of the Reformation and our subject is "Union with Christ."

Let me first tell you why you should give your attention to this subject. This subject is about our relationship with God. Of course, the whole Bible is about our relationship with God. But the subject of "Union with Christ" gets more deeply into the nature of our relationship with God because it is all about the nature of our relationship with Jesus Christ if we are believers. And this is at the very heart of living a life that is meaningful and joyful and worthwhile and most importantly pleasing to God.

God created us to experience the fullness of life in relationship with him. The goal of the whole story that the Bible tells is people glorifying God by finding their greatest delight in knowing and loving and serving him. The greatest problem in our lives and in the world in general is sin and sin is living in rebellion against God. The Bible insists that that is the way of misery and death. We were made to flourish by delighting in God and delighting in living our lives to please God. And this is the goal of salvation as well. Listen to how Jesus puts this in his prayer to his Father recorded in John 17. In verse 3 he says, "³And this is eternal life, that they know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent." Jesus is saying that this is at the heart of truly being alive – knowing God and knowing Jesus. We were made for this. This is the goal of salvation.

Union with Christ is how the separation between us and God is overcome. In Isaiah 59:2 God says to his people, "... your iniquities have made a separation between you and your God, and your sins have hidden his face from you so that he does not hear." Separation between God and man is the reason for all that is wrong in the world and all that

is wrong in our lives and the reason for that separation is sin. The biblical teaching about union with Christ is how that separation is overcome; it is about how we can have a close and intimate relationship with God. Union has to do with being united. It has to do with being one. And being one with God is at the heart of having a good life. It is at the heart of all blessing. This is what it means to be saved. Union with Christ is the biblical teaching about how as believers we are one with Jesus Christ with is how we are one with God.

Now the reason I'm dealing with this subject in this series on Truths of the Reformation is that it was an important part of the teaching of the Reformers at the time of the Reformation and in the Reformed tradition that followed. A number of the books that were written in connection with the celebration of the 500th anniversary of the beginning of the Reformation have a chapter in them about union with Christ. But as is the case with all the themes that were prominent in the teaching of the Reformers, the theme of union with Christ is an important biblical theme. Ultimately it is important and precious because it is a key part of the biblical teaching of salvation. The way that we are saved is by being united to Jesus Christ.

John Calvin give us a wonderful sense of the richness of this truth when he says in one of his sermons on Ephesians, "We should be satisfied with the benefits of our Lord Jesus Christ, and that when we are grafted into his body and made one with him by belief of the gospel, then we may assure ourselves that he is the fountain which never dries up, nor can ever become exhausted, and that in him we have all variety of good things, and all perfection."

Now the idea of union with Christ may seem too hard to understand, but the Bible gives us a lot of images to work with and to help us. It gives us a number of pictures that give us some idea of what it means to be united to Christ. One of the most helpful is found in passages that compare the relationship between Christ and his people to the relationship between a man and a woman in marriage. In marriage two individuals are united. The two become one in a very real sense. They do not stop being individual people, but they are united, and that union is a very real union. Paul describes the relationship between Christ and

his people in terms of a marriage relationship. In Ephesians 5:31-32, he writes, "³¹Therefore a man shall leave his father and mother and hold fast to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh." ³²This mystery is profound, and I am saying that it refers to Christ and the church."

If you are part of a good marriage, you will know of this mystery that Paul is talking about. Marriage as it ought to be is a very profound union between two people. We reflect that union when we speak of our spouse as our better-half. Without our spouse we are not whole. Without our spouse we are not complete. That is why losing a spouse is so devastating. It is hard to put into words. One part of it that is easier to understand is the financial union. Whatever you own you own together. If one spouse incurs a debt, the debt is the responsibility of the couple. But that is only a small part of the union that marriage is. Together you are a whole. Apart you are incomplete.

This does not mean that single people are incomplete. Jesus was single, and he was the most complete human being who ever lived. But once a person is married you become ½ of a whole and then you are no longer complete without the other.

This helps us to understand how two people can be united together. You don't stop being an individual, but it is possible for two individuals to become one in a very real and deep way. And the Bible uses this idea to help us to understand the relationship between Christ and his people. Christ is the husband. The church is the wife. There are many people involved. But there is also a very real unity. Christ and his church are one in a way that is similar to the way a husband and wife are one.

Now this is a wonderful relationship. It is a close and intimate relationship. Paul draws out some of the wonderful implications of this in these verses in Ephesians 5. He says that Christ is the head in the relationship with his bride, the church. That means that the church submits to Christ. That is a good thing in biblical thought. Submission to God-given authority is the way of flourishing in God's world. The way of flourishing and blessing as the bride of Christ is to submit to Christ as our head. But the stress in this passage about the headship of Christ is on his love for the church. Christ loved the church and gave himself for her, says Paul.

So, this is one of the ways that the biblical speaks of the union of believers with Christ. The union is like a marriage union. The relationship is one of love and submission. Christ loves the church. He gave his life for his church. He seeks the wellbeing and flourishing of his bride. And the church receives his love and submits to his loving headship.

But there are other ways that the Bible speaks of this subject of the union of believers with Christ. The Bible also speaks of the believers as a body with Christ as the head of the body. Paul speaks of this in Ephesians 4:11-16. He refers to the church as the body of Christ. Christ is the head of the body. This is union with Christ. Christ and his people are one body.

Now in this case Paul uses the body imagery rather loosely. As John Stott writes in his comments on this passage, "We must not look in these verses for inspired instruction on human anatomy and physiology. The apostle's intention is not to teach us how the human body works, but rather how the body of Christ grows." The way that Paul speaks in this passage, Christ and his people are one body, but it is in many ways unlike a human body.

Paul here is speaking about how the body of Christ grows. He says that the body grows to become like its head, Jesus Christ. In verse 15 he says that "we are to grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ." That does not make sense if you are thinking about a human body. You can't really picture a human body growing to be like its head. If you try to do that you will imagine some pretty strange pictures in your mind. This makes no sense when you think of a human body, but it does make sense when you are thinking about the body of Christ. The church is the body and Christ is the head and the goal of the church is to be more and more like Christ, the head.

And then Paul says that the head makes the body grow. In verses 15 and 16 Paul speaks about Christ as the head of the body and he says that the head makes the body grow. Again, that really does not make sense when you are speaking about a human body. But it makes perfect sense when you are speaking about the body of Christ. Christ is the head of the body and he makes the body grow.

But you see how the underlying reality here is the union of Jesus and his people. It is another image of union with Christ. Christ and his people are one. Christ is the head and his people are the body and the goal of the body is to become more like the head and Christ the head makes the body grow. Of course, one of the points of the passage is that Christ uses people in various ways to make the body to become more like him, but still it insists that it is Christ the head who makes the body grow in Christ-likeness.

In his comments on this passage John Calvin wrote, “As the root conveys sap to the whole tree, so all the vigor which we possess must flow from Christ.... All the life or health which is diffused through the members flows from the head.” But then he also sums up how Christ makes the body grow using the members of the body. “Through the members, as canals, is conveyed from the head all that is necessary for the nourishment of the body.”

So, this idea of union with Christ has to do with how we can become better human beings. That is a goal that many people have. There is a whole self-help industry and much of it has to do with helping people to be better people. There is a huge counseling industry and much of it is to help people deal with their problems and have a better life. And some of that may be helpful to some people. But the Bible has a different perspective than the world about what becoming a better human being looks like and how that is attained and union with Christ is at the center of what the Bible says on this subject.

First Jesus provides the model of a perfect human being. The passage that we have been looking at makes the point that the goal of the body of Christ is to become like Christ. It speaks about growing “to mature manhood” and then it defines this as “the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ.” Jesus Christ is the perfect human being. And so, in order to be a better human being, we must become more like Jesus. That is the most important goal for our lives according to the Bible – to become more Christ-like, which is to become more God-like.

This is the way to have a worthwhile life. This is the way to live a good life. This is the way to live a life that is pleasing to God. This is the way to

hear God say to us on the day of judgment, “Well done, good and faithful servant.” This is the way to become a better human being.

This is not to say that seeking to become more like Jesus is about earning God’s favor. We can never do that because of the seriousness of our sinful condition. When the Bible deals with us becoming better human beings and more like Christ, it is speaking about the outworking of what Jesus accomplished for us by his life and death and resurrection. We come to Christ as sinners seeking forgiveness based on the fact that he died to pay the penalty for our sins. That is how we are made right with God and adopted as his children. But then our task and delight are to become more like Jesus Christ. That is not the way to acceptance with God. That is the result of acceptance with God.

But then the goal of salvation is that we live lives that are pleasing to God and the ultimate example of such life is Jesus Christ. The life that is pleasing to God and thus the best possible way to live, is the life that is most like that of Jesus. That is what this passage in Ephesians 4 is all about. And union with Christ is at the heart of that. We grow in Christ-likeness because of our union with Christ. We grow in Christ-likeness because Christ as the head of the body “makes the body grow.” In this body, the head of the body provides the life and energy by which the body grows.

But this passage also stresses the role of the rest of the body. Christ makes the body grow, but he does it through the Bible and through other Christians. Verse 11 speaks of shepherds and teachers in the church whose task it is to teach the Bible. And the following verses speak of how the members of the body help one another to grow. So, verse 15 says, “Rather speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in every way unto him who is the head into Christ....” So, union with Christ means that Christ as the head causes the body to grow, but it also means that he uses the rest of the body to cause that growth by speaking the truth in love. So, the passage is not only speaking about the official teaching ministry of the church, but also the informal interactions of Christians with one another as we teach one another and encourage one another and when necessary even rebuke one another in love.

It's a beautiful picture. And union with Christ is at the heart of it. It is part of the good news of salvation. Salvation is about forgiveness for our sins, but it is about so much more. It is also about being set free from the destructive power of sin and through union with Christ being empowered to live the kind of life that we were designed to live – the kind of life that Christ did live. This is the good life as the Bible teaches it.

So, we have seen a couple of the ways that the Bible speaks about the union of believers with Christ. Christ and his people are one like a husband and a wife are one. In connection with that idea we learn that we have a warm and loving relationship with Christ in which Christ loved the church and gave himself for her and in which we the church submit joyfully to Christ. We have also considered the idea of the body of Christ and saw that the goal of the body is to become more and more like Christ the head and that Christ as the head makes it possible for the body to become more like him. And again, that is a wonderful gospel truth because our lives are most blessed when we grow in living like Christ.

With this background it will be easier to understand yet another way in which the Bible speaks of union with Christ. In many places the Bible, especially in the writings of the apostle Paul, speaks of believers as being “in Christ.” That is a little more difficult to conceptualize, but it helps if we think in terms of the different images that we have look at so far, marriage and the body of Christ. Both of those images convey the idea that believers are one with Christ. In a very profound and meaningful way we are united to Christ so that there is a sense in which Christ and his people are one. This idea is also conveyed by the little phrase “in Christ.”

We will look at a number of examples of this phrase and see what a wonderfully rich and comforting idea it is. Romans 8:1 says “There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.” Now condemnation is what we all deserve. We are all guilty of breaking God's law and so, we are all worthy of condemnation by God as the Judge of all men. But this verse says that “for those who are in Christ

Jesus" there is "now no condemnation." What a wonderful application of the idea of union with Christ!

Believers are "in Christ." We are united to Christ. We are one with Christ. This is a spiritual unity and a spiritual unity is a real unity. Because of this unity with Christ my sins can be counted against him and his righteousness is counted as mine. This is how it is possible for what Christ did on the cross to count for me. Jesus paid the penalty for my sins. I receive his righteousness. This kind of transfer is possible because believers are "in Christ."

This is a very important idea in the Bible. The Bible also teaches that we are "in Adam" by nature. Because we are in Adam we share in Adam's sin and we share in the spiritual death that is the result of Adam's sin. Paul teaches this in 1 Corinthians 15 where he writes in verse 22, "For as in Adam all die, so in Christ shall all be made alive." A term that is sometimes used to express this idea is, "representative head." Adam represented us in the Garden of Eden when he sinned. Because we are in him we share in the guilt of his sin. That is the bad news. The good news is that by faith we can be transferred to being "in Christ" and that means that we share in everything that he did for us by his life, death and resurrection. When he died on the cross, we died with him because we were in him. When he rose from the dead, we rose with him because we were in him.

It is an odd way of thinking, but you get used to it and it is very precious indeed. If we are outside of Christ we are on our own; we dead in sin and under the wrath of God. If we are in Christ we are alive spiritually because he is alive, and our sins are forgiven because he paid the penalty. "In Christ" is a wonderful place to be. It is the place of safety and it is the place where we share in the riches of what Christ has accomplished for us.

Consider one more example: 2 Corinthians 5:17, ¹⁷"Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come." This is a wonderful passage. It teaches that if we are "in Christ" we are made new. The old is gone. The new has come. But this passage means more than it appears to mean on the surface. The new creation is what God is working toward in his saving purposes.

After Jesus returns, God and his people will live together in the new creation. The people of God will be completely without sin and they will enjoy a perfect relationship with God. What 2 Corinthians 5:17 says is that for those who are “in Christ” the new creation has already begun in them. When Jesus rose from the dead, it was the beginning of the new creation. And because believers are in Christ they share in that resurrection life that is the beginning of the new creation.

So, you see being “in Christ” is being joined to the one who in his resurrected body is living the life of the world to come. Another way the Bible speaks of the same thing is when it speaks of eternal life. Eternal life is the life of the world to come. Eternal life is the life of the new creation. Eternal life is the life that brought Jesus from the dead. And so eternal life is what those who are “in Christ” share. That is the meaning of 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.”

So, you see the riches that we have in Christ. We are sinners. Christ has conquered sin. We are weak. Christ is strong. We are needy. Christ has all that we need. And by being united to him we share in his righteousness, in his strength, in his life and in his victory. Hear again these wonderful words of John Calvin who was one of the Reformers who helped the church to understand the biblical teaching of union with Christ. “We should be satisfied with the benefits of our Lord Jesus Christ, and that when we are grafted into his body and made one with him by belief of the gospel, then we may assure ourselves that he is the fountain which never dries up, nor can ever become exhausted, and that in him we have all variety of good things, and all perfection.”

Now our baptism is a sign of this union with Christ. Romans 6:3 refers to believers as those “who have been baptized into Christ Jesus.” 1 Corinthians 12:13 says that “in one Spirit we were all baptized into one body.” This means that baptism is a sign and a seal of our union with Christ. It reminds us that we have been united to Christ by faith. And it confirms it as well. When we think of our baptism we are assured that we are united to Christ and thus that we are one with him. And that means that we share in all the blessings that he has obtained for us by his life, death and resurrection.

I began by saying that our relationship with God is at the heart of all that is good about life and separation from God is the reason for all that is bad about life. Union with Christ means that we have a very intimate relationship with God. It is a relationship of love. It is a relationship through which we share in forgiveness for our sins and power to live a life that is pleasing to God. By being “in Christ,” the separation from God that sin causes is taken away, and we are in a close relationship of love with God. This is a very precious truth. Jesus Christ is the source of true well-being in this life and for eternity and if we are “in him” we receive all those blessings.

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