

Holiness: Union with Christ

Reading: John 17

¹⁰ All mine are yours, and yours are mine, and I am glorified in them. ¹¹ And I am no longer in the world, but they are in the world, and I am coming to you. Holy Father, keep them in your name, which you have given me, that they may be one, even as we are one. ¹² While I was with them, I kept them in your name, which you have given me. I have guarded them, and not one of them has been lost except the son of destruction, that the Scripture might be fulfilled. ¹³ But now I am coming to you, and these things I speak in the world, that they may have my joy fulfilled in themselves. ¹⁴ I have given them your word, and the world has hated them because they are not of the world, just as I am not of the world. ¹⁵ I do not ask that you take them out of the world, but that you keep them from the evil one. ¹⁶ They are not of the world, just as I am not of the world. ¹⁷ Sanctify them in the truth; your word is truth. ¹⁸ As you sent me into the world, so I have sent them into the world. ¹⁹ And for their sake I consecrate myself, that they also may be sanctified in truth. ²⁰ "I do not ask for these only, but also for those who will believe in me through their word, ²¹ 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. ²² The glory that you have given me I have given to them, that they may be one even as we are one, ²³ 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.

Some may be wondering what has union with Christ got to do with sanctification. This is so especially with those who believe that holiness is something that one has to work on after one has come to Christ.

Last week we have seen that holiness is the work of the Triune God in us, a work that is made real to us by the Spirit through the work of Christ. We need to be reminded that holiness is not what we do but what has been done for us and to us. As we have said that holiness is an attribute of God and not given to another, then the only way forward with the notion of holiness is that we are connected to the Triune God. In other words, it is union with Christ that is our sanctification.

This being so, then union with Christ has everything to do with sanctification. In this study, we will explore the way we understand 'union with Christ'. Often the word 'theosis' or deification is used for union with Christ. There are difficulties with this as the word 'theosis' has been taken to mean that we have become god. For a start we need to take it as a mystical union.

Salvation in the evangelical world has been reduced to a prayer of confession and acceptance of Jesus Christ as Saviour. From then on it is a process of working one's way to maturity, and indoctrination into a system of know-how in order to do things better or to live in an ethical manner, i.e. doing the right things (by whom?). Knowing the church orders then become a must and that is about all that some people know about Christianity. Often this process follows the secular model. I am aware this may sound like a harsh criticism, but it does exist. Christ did not come to save us and propel us to another system. He came into our (His) world, took on the humanity He created in order that we may be incorporated into His being.

The point of salvation is not so much as what we do, but what we are or what we have become. Saying a prayer of confession does not make one a Christian, though it is a good start. It is the point of discovery or the point of awakening to what has been already an accomplished work of God through Christ and the Spirit. Therefore, it is not what we do that makes us a Christian. It is the work of the Holy Spirit in taking us into Christ, and it is the participation (*koinonia*) in the life of Christ or the union with Christ that makes us a Christian. That is the work of God and we discover that by the awakening of faith. That is what the Triune God has done and is doing in us. This brings us to the theme today, i.e. union with Christ. We cannot talk about sanctification without raising the theme of 'union with Christ'. We need to explore the meaning of 'union with Christ' and then relate it to sanctification.

Calvin begins the third book of his Institutes, 'The way in which we receive the grace of Christ', with these words.

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 to dwell within us. (Calvin, *Institutes*, III.1.i)

Biblical models and modes of thoughts of ‘union with Christ’

‘Union with Christ’ is not a theme that is talked about much in Christian circles. One reason is the fear that it means that we will be made divine by the union. The phrase may have been used sometimes but the meaning is obscure and apart from expressing a close relationship, it remains a loose expression. I will try to define this expression in this study. One way is to use the models given to us in scripture.

Paul said in Romans that our baptism is incorporation into Jesus Christ.

⁵For 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. 6:5)

What did Paul mean by this statement that ‘we have been united with Christ’? In what way are we united with Christ and how do we understand this statement which is foundational in our understanding of sanctification? The way we can get a handle on this is to look at models and ways of speaking that have been given to us in scripture and work from there. Words that are used to bring out this state of union are participation, incorporation, identification, grafting and adoption. This union is best seen in the imagery given to us in John 15. We are the branches in Christ.

¹“I am the true vine, and my Father is the vinedresser. ²Every 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. ³Already you are clean because of the word that I have spoken to you. ⁴Abide 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. ⁵I 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. ⁶If 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. ⁷If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be done for you. ⁸By this my Father is glorified, that you bear much fruit and so prove to be my disciples. (John 15:1-8)

The Father is the vinedresser and Jesus the true vine. We are the branches. We are not brought to be beside Christ, walking with Him. We are brought into Christ by the Spirit. In other words, we have been grafted into Christ and this is the new life we have. Like the branches of the vine, it needs to be connected to the vine in order to be alive. When detached it will wither and die. We draw our life sustenance from Christ, the bread of life (John 6:35). Apart from Christ, i.e. without the connectedness with Christ, we do not have a life. John wrote, ‘In him was life, and the life was the light of men’ (John 1:4). John further added, ‘...yet you refuse to come to me that you may have life’ (John 5:40).

If we are not in union with Christ like the branches on the vine, the natural result is that we wither and eventually will be discarded. This connectedness with Christ is holy because Christ is the holy one. I find it hard to hold to the concept of a partial holiness when we are brought into union with a holy Christ. In Christ we cannot but be holy. That is the definite sanctification we talked about in the last study. Christ draws us into Himself, the holy one.

Jesus used this imagery to bring to us the truth of union with Him and He later made it explicit in John 17.

²⁰“I do not ask for these only, but also for those who will believe in me through their word, ²¹that 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. ²²The glory that you have given me I have given to them, that they may be one even as we are one, ²³I 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. (John 17:20-23)

This passage is the kernel on which we based our whole thinking on salvation. Jesus and His Father together with the Spirit are in a triune oneness. In His intercessory prayer, Jesus said, ‘Father, are in me, and I in

you, that they also may be in us' (John 17:21). What Jesus was doing on earth was to take the sin of humanity onto Himself and defeat it, thus making it possible to bring humanity into the triune oneness of the Godhead. Our salvation is not the mere believing in a system of doctrine or the practice of the right methodology, and not even subscribing to an excellent system of ethics. It is being brought into the oneness of the Triune God and living in Him. This is the Triune God, Father, Son and Spirit working together.

Union with Christ has not been a topic much discussed in Christian circles. There is a reluctance to talk about it because of the fear that it be misconstrued that we can become divine, 'partakers of the divine nature' as Peter put it.

³His 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, ⁴by which he has granted to us his precious and very great promises, so that through them you may become partakers (*koinoinia*) of the divine nature, having escaped from the corruption that is in the world because of sinful desire. (2 Peter 1:3-4)

The phrase, 'partakers' (of the divine nature), has given rise to some misunderstanding. The word is *koinonia* and is translated as partaker or participant. It certainly does not connote possession. It is having a part of, or a part taker. It is best thought of as joint participation, communion or fellowship, like being a fellow of a college, i.e. one out of many sharing in the same vocation.

This is the theosis or deification developed in Eastern Orthodox thought. This has its roots in the statement by Athanasius, 'He was incarnate (became man) that we might be made god'. In making this statement, Athanasius did not have theosis (deification) in mind. He was more interested in defending the divine-human nature of Christ as the basis of our salvation. Theosis or deification is fraught with dangers and the term is often avoided, lest it be misunderstood.

Covenantal union

We have seen the parable of the vine and the vinedresser in John 15. We have also read what Jesus said regarding being in Him and in the Father (John 17). Of course, we cannot take this imagery in a literal manner. We need to define what we mean by that union or oneness. In Genesis, we read that the man and his wife 'shall become one flesh'.

²⁴Therefore a man shall leave his father and his mother and hold fast to his wife, and they shall become one flesh. (Gen. 2:24)

Of course, the man will still be male and the wife female. They will remain as two individuals. Nothing will change that. In what sense are they 'one flesh'? We need to see that as a covenantal union. They have become one, giving to one another and receiving from one another, just as the covenantal relationship in the Triunity of the Godhead, the three are one in essence but distinct in their functions. In the marriage union, one does not live for oneself but for the other while we remain as two distinct individuals, male and female. My need is not the basis of the relationship. The relationship is maintained by the giving and receiving from one another.

Paul used this imagery of the oneness of marriage to depict the church as the bride of Christ. This marriage union on earth is a foretaste of the heavenly union of the lamb and His bride.

²And I saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. (Rev. 21:2)

Paul often used the earthly marriage imagery to illustrate the heavenly union with Christ.

²For I feel a divine jealousy for you, since I betrothed you to one husband, to present you as a pure virgin to Christ. (2 Cor. 11:2)

²⁹ For no one ever hated his own flesh, but nourishes and cherishes it, just as Christ does the church, ³⁰ because we are members of his body. ³¹ “Therefore a man shall leave his father and mother and hold fast to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh.” ³² This mystery is profound, and I am saying that it refers to Christ and the church. (Eph. 5:29-32)

The union of the church with Christ is indeed a ‘profound mystery’. In the last study, we have already seen that this covenantal relationship is the way God came to His people from creation to the new creation.

Union with Christ is not the coalescence of substance. Union with Christ is not to be coalesced into Christ, but to have a share or a part (*koinonia*) in what Christ is. This union may be termed a spiritual or mystical union. By this we mean what is experienced is neither apparent to the senses nor obvious to the intelligence. It is not the result of our logic or our deductive reasoning. It is not *quid pro quo*, something you get in return for what you give. It is something of the Spirit and I think we should just leave it there before we wander into areas beyond our understanding.

This union is also expressed in the Lord’s Supper. Paul put it clearly in 1 Corinthians when he said it is our participation in the blood and body of Christ.

¹⁶ The cup of blessing that we bless, is it not a participation (*koinonia*) in the blood of Christ? The bread that we break, is it not a participation (*koinonia*) in the body of Christ? ¹⁷ Because there is one bread, we who are many are one body, for we all partake of the one bread. (1 Corinthians 10:16-17)

As we ‘partake of the one bread’ we show that we are in Christ. The Supper is not merely a remembrance, though that is an important aspect, it is also a celebration of our union or participation (*koinonia*) in Christ. This is the same word that Peter used when he mentioned that we are partakers (*koinonia*) of the divine nature. In showing that we are in union with Christ in the communion, we have also come into union with one another as well. What does this mean? Just as in the triune relationship, it is the giving to and the receiving from one another. We need to work that out in practical ways in our gatherings. Holiness is not only personal but also communal.

We should also look at a few other passages of scripture where this theme I mentioned. One of these passages is Ephesians 1.

³ 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, ⁴ even as he chose us in him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and blameless before him. In love ⁵ he predestined us for adoption to himself as sons through Jesus Christ, according to the purpose of his will, ⁶ to the praise of his glorious grace, with which he has blessed us in the Beloved. ⁷ In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of his grace, ⁸ which he lavished upon us, in all wisdom and insight ⁹ making known to us the mystery of his will, according to his purpose, which he set forth in Christ ¹⁰ as a plan for the fullness of time, to unite all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth.

¹¹ In him we have obtained an inheritance, having been predestined according to the purpose of him who works all things according to the counsel of his will, ¹² so that we who were the first to hope in Christ might be to the praise of his glory. ¹³ In him you also, when you heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation, and believed in him, were sealed with the promised Holy Spirit, ¹⁴ who is the guarantee of our inheritance until we acquire possession of it, to the praise of his glory.

We have spoken of incorporation into Christ, union with Christ, participation in Christ, and these imageries have been summarised by Paul extensively in his letters with the expression, ‘in Christ’. This passage in Ephesians 1 is a classic example. Throughout this one sentence (in the original Greek text), there is no reference to our contribution to this work. It is all about what God has done in Christ to bring to us the riches of His grace. Noticed too that this is cosmic in its plan and purpose, ‘to unite all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth’. The purpose of this work of God is ‘that we should be holy and blameless before him’ (v. 4).

Thus, we see that the sanctifying work of God is done by incorporating us into Christ. We have said that holiness is an attribute of God and this attribute is not communicated to another. Holiness is the presence of God and we are holy in so far as we are united or in participation with Him. This is not achievable by

us no matter how hard we try. While we highly extol the truth of justification by faith, some have plunged into the abyss of trying to sanctify themselves by works.

There is still another aspect of this union with Christ that we need to address, and that is the communal nature of this union. While it is fine for us to see this union as a personal matter, it does not stop there. Incorporation and participation are not merely relationships between the individual and Christ. This union needs to be expressed in the wider community of the church and this is where many have failed miserably. How can one express this union in the community when one can't even be one with one's spouse? It is the loss or absence of covenant relationship, the covenantal relationship with the Triune God. This is where our salvation begins, not just by merely beguiled into saying a prayer.

We need to note that in this union with Christ, it is the Spirit that undertakes this task. As Paul says, 'For in one Spirit we are all baptised into one body – Jews or Greeks, slaves or free – and all were made to drink of one spirit' (1 Cor, 12:13). Thus, in our union with Christ, we are also brought into union with one another. The way in which this is to be expressed will be dealt with in the last session.

The apostle John wrote regarding this in his letter, 1 John 1.

¹ That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we looked upon and have touched with our hands, concerning the word of life— ² the life was made manifest, and we have seen it, and testify to it and proclaim to you the eternal life, which was with the Father and was made manifest to us— ³ that which we have seen and heard we proclaim also to you, so that you too may have fellowship with us; and indeed our fellowship (*koinonia*) is with the Father and with his Son Jesus Christ. ⁴ And we are writing these things so that our joy may be complete.

The fellowship that is referred to here is *koinonia*, the same word that is used when Paul referred to the communion expressed in the bread and wine. Unless we are united with Christ in the divine fellowship, then we will not be able to express the covenantal union with God's people on earth and our joy will not be complete. To belong to Christ cannot be dissociated from belonging to the community of God's people. This is Paul's opening address to the church in Corinth, a church that we know well to be full of ethical problems.

To the church of God that is in Corinth, to those sanctified in Christ Jesus, called to be saints together with all those who in every place call upon the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, both their Lord and ours: (1 Cor. 1:2)

Paul knew full well in writing to the Corinthians that there were problems in their midst. He had visited them and written to them before. Yet, he could address them as saints. We need to note here that sanctification is a work in Christ and not by them as they were 'called to be saints'. It is the pleasure of God and solely by His grace. We do have a problem with the external manifestation of holiness and the internal reality of holiness. I will deal with this in the last study.

Conclusion

Many issues have been raised in this study and I need to sum them up before we proceed. We do not increase in holiness. God is holy and our participation in or union with Christ is what makes us holy. It is like the marriage relationship. The man and woman are 100% husband and wife from the first day to the last day. They do not become more husband or more wife as the days go on. They may grow in their appreciation of each other over the years. This union is not a coalescence of substance. It is a participation in one another, the giving to and receiving from one another. This is a covenantal union as in the marriage relationship, an earthly model of the heavenly union. Just as in a marriage relationship, while one partner may be absent from the other by distance, their union remains just as real as if they have never parted. As God is holy, we are holy only when we are in union in Him. There is no degree of holiness. We are either holy, when we are in union with Him, or not holy when we are not in Him.