

STUDY 4

Baptism as Incorporation into Christ

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Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? (Rom. 6:3).¹

We have been ‘baptized into Christ Jesus’. We may express this as being ‘incorporated into Christ’. What does it mean to be incorporated into Christ? The word ‘incorporated’ is not a New Testament expression. This idea is expressed in the New Testament in other ways such as, ‘participants of the divine nature’ (2 Pet. 1:4). John expresses this differently in Jesus’ prayer in the Garden of Gethsemane. He describes it as a union in the Son’s communion with the Father (John 17:21). Paul puts it differently. He does not use the word ‘incorporate’. He is more fond of the term ‘in Christ’ (Eph. 1:1–10). This understanding of being in Christ is not absent from the early church fathers. Irenaeus puts it this way: ‘. . . that He would become the Son of man for this purpose, that man also might become the son of God’.² Athanasius’ classic statement is well known: ‘For He was made man that we might be made God; and He manifested Himself by a body that we might receive the idea of the unseen Father; and He endured the insolence of men that we might inherit immortality’.³ The church fathers have linked the theme of union with Christ to the incarnation of Jesus as this theme was pivotal in their wrestling with Christology in the early church. Both Luther and Calvin wrote much on our union with Christ. Though Luther’s writings on this theme may not have been highlighted, the recent Finnish School has brought this to the fore. Calvin puts our union with Christ as the priority in all things.

That was a quick and very brief outline of the subject before us as we get an idea of the various ways in which this term is expressed in the New Testament as well as in the history of the church. The scope of this topic is wide and there are many issues involved, but it is not possible to deal in detail with all of them here. In fact, this theme runs through the whole of scripture and indeed in this school. What does it mean to be incorporated into Christ? This study will look at the expressions and imageries used by the New Testament writers and the reformers.

¹ Unless otherwise stated, all scripture quotations in this study are from the New Revised Standard Version.

² *Irenaeus Against Heresies*, book 3, ch. 10, pt. 2, in *The Ante-Nicene Fathers*, vol. 1, ‘The Apostolic Fathers . . .’ (eds Alexander Roberts & James Donaldson, Hendrickson, Peabody, 1995), p. 424.

³ Athanasius, *The Incarnation of the Word*, 54.3, in *Nicene & Post-Nicene Fathers*, vol. 4, ‘Athanasius: Select Works & Letters’ (ed. Philip Schaff, Hendrickson, Peabody, 1995), p. 65.

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PETER

Peter describes it as being ‘participants in the divine nature’:

Thus he has given us, through these things, his precious and very great promises, so that through them you may escape from the corruption that is in the world because of lust, and may become participants of the divine nature (2 Pet. 1:4).

We start with Peter because he identified two issues here for us in becoming participants in the divine nature. They are the promises of God and the delivery from corruption. We need to keep them in focus in the discussion. One does not become a participant of the divine nature because of something that one can do. To become participants of the divine nature results from the promises of God and all that He has done in delivering humanity from the corruption of sin.

JOHN

John brings to us another facet of this incorporation. In Jesus’ prayer in the Garden of Gethsemane, John records Jesus as saying:

. . . that they may all be one. As you, Father, are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us . . . (John 17:21).

John sees this oneness as coming into the union that the Son has with the Father. It is Jesus taking humanity into the Triune communion. That is what Jesus achieved through his work on the cross. John had earlier preempted this indwelling in Christ when he wrote, ‘And the Word became flesh and lived among us’ (John 1:14). Christ came to dwell among us so that we may dwell in him. This sequence is taken up repeatedly by the early church fathers. The incarnation theme is integral to their thoughts as they wrestle with the person and work of Jesus.

In his first letter, John repeats this theme of indwelling in the Son’s communion with the Father when he says, ‘and truly our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son Jesus Christ’ (1 John 1:3), and, ‘you will abide in the Son and in the Father’ (2:24).

John takes up an agricultural theme in further elaborating on the theme of the indwelling Christ. In using the analogy of the vine and the branches, John is repeating, in another way, Christ’s union with the Father and that the disciples are taken into the communion that he has with the Father. He wrote:

I am the true vine, and my Father is the vinegrower . . . ⁴ Abide in me as I abide in you. Just as the branch cannot bear fruit by itself unless it abides in the vine, neither can you unless you abide in me. ⁵ I am the vine, you are the branches. Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit, because apart from me you can do nothing (John 15:1, 4–5).

The ‘abiding’ in Christ here means more than just remaining or staying together. It has the force of inseparability as the branch cannot exist on its own without the support of the whole plant. However, that is not all. This inseparability is further

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emphasised by John in a real indwelling when he refers to the oneness in the flesh and blood of Jesus after the feeding of the five thousand:

So Jesus said to them, ‘Very truly, I tell you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you.’⁵⁴ Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood have eternal life, and I will raise them up on the last day; ⁵⁵ for my flesh is true food and my blood is true drink. ⁵⁶ Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood abide in me, and I in them’ (John 6:53–56).

This is a difficult saying to accept and many of the disciples left Jesus after that (John 6:66). Jesus was firstly referring to his flesh and blood reality as a human person and secondly to humanity’s participation in his being sacramentally in the eucharist. This participation is not a deliberation by humanity because Jesus said, ‘no one can come to me unless it is granted by the Father’ (John 6:65).

PAUL

Death and suffering are never far away from Paul’s thoughts. Just as he says that baptism is into Christ’s death (Rom. 6:3), the incorporation into Christ involves ‘the sharing of his sufferings by becoming like him in his death’ (Phil. 3:10). This is the process of our deliverance from the corruption of sin. This process involves dying and rising, which is the creation of new life in Christ (Rom. 6:4–5). This is our incorporation; not the institutional type, but the living organism in Christ.

This incorporation also involves a process of transformation (Phil. 3:21; Rom. 12:1; 2 Cor. 3:18; Gal. 4:19), as all living organisms must undergo. This transformation is necessary because humanity is created in God’s image and this image has been reversed because of sin. Thus humanity needs to be ‘transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another; for this comes from the Lord, the Spirit’ (2 Cor. 3:18).

It is in the opening verses of Ephesians (1:3–10) that Paul went on quite extensively and jubilantly about what it is to be ‘in Christ’ or ‘in the Beloved’. Like Peter, here Paul deals with the promise (1:3–6) and the delivery from sin (1:7). It was not just a philosophical treatise. In this letter, he was spelling out for his readers what the church really is. He was setting out the framework for the way the community of the redeemed expresses itself as those who are united in Christ and all that implies. However, this union is not just an idea or a theological concept to be grasped. It has to be realised or experienced in some tangible way in the body of Christ.

Paul talks about the armour of God towards the end of the letter, and Martin Bleby commented:

When then Paul says, ‘Put on the whole armour of God, so that you may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil’ (Eph. 6:11), he is not talking about taking up something that God supplies, or joining in the struggle alongside God, so much as *standing and living in God Himself*, in the saving victory that He alone has already accomplished.⁴

⁴ Martin Bleby, ‘Put on the Whole Armour of God’, in *My Servants the Prophets*, NCTM Ministry School, 2005, p. 130 (italics mine).

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Reinhard likewise makes the point that Ephesians 6:10–18 is not a call to personal piety but another way of describing union with Christ.⁵

Paul further uses the husband and wife imagery to bring the point of Christ's union with his church home to his readers in Ephesians 5:25–33. This union between Christ and the church requires the 'cleansing . . . with the washing of water by the word' (Eph. 5:26), in order to make her holy. Christ 'gave himself up' in order to achieve this delivery from corruption:

'For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two will become one flesh.'³² This is a great mystery, and I am applying it to Christ and the church (Eph. 5:31–32).

Paul is here talking about earthly relationships. The husband–wife relationship mirrors ever so closely the relationship between Christ and his church. The oneness of the husband and wife is the earthly parallel of the oneness we have in Christ. Just as the husband and wife are joined in union, the church is incorporated in or united with Christ. The oneness between husband and wife is not merely the faith or the belief of one in the other, it is embracing the other in the relationship. So in the same manner our incorporation into Christ is not merely our faith or belief in Christ but our faith embracing Christ. This is the point made by Luther.

LUTHER

Writing of Luther in the book, *Union with Christ*, Mannermaa noted:

Central to Luther's theology is that in faith the human being really participates by faith in the person of Christ and in the divine life and the victory that is in it. Or, to say it the other way round: Christ gives his person to the human being through the faith by which we grasp it. 'Faith' involves participation in Christ, in whom there is no sin, death, or curse . . .

According to the Reformer, justifying faith does not merely signify a reception of the forgiveness imputed to a human being for the sake of merit of Christ . . . Therefore, justifying faith means participation in God in Christ's person.⁶

It is not possible to reduce Luther's understanding of our union in Christ in merely a few paragraphs except to simply highlight some of the points he made. When mentioning Luther, one naturally thinks of his teaching on justification by faith. Often this understanding has been reduced to an intellectual, extrinsic and forensic forgiveness rather than as union with Christ. In recent years, the new Finnish School has highlighted Luther's understanding of the mystical union in Christ.⁷

Luther writes of this union and its relationship to faith by using the bride–bridegroom analogy:

⁵ D. Reinhard, 'Ephesians 6:10–18: A Call to Personal Piety or Another Way of Describing Union with Christ?' in *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society*, Sep. 2005, vol. 48, no. 3, pp. 521–32.

⁶ T. Mannermaa, 'Justification and Theosis in Lutheran–Orthodox Perspective', in Braaten and Jenson (eds), *Union with Christ* (Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, 1998), p. 32.

⁷ Braaten and Jenson (eds.), *Union with Christ*.

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[Another] incomparable benefit of faith is that it unites the soul with Christ as a bride is united with her bridegroom. By this mystery, as the Apostle teaches, Christ and the soul become one flesh [Eph. 5:31–32]. And if they are one flesh and there is between them a true marriage . . . it follows that everything they have they hold in common, the good as well as the evil. Accordingly the believing soul can boast of and glory in whatever Christ has as though it were its own, and whatever the soul has Christ claims as his own.⁸

Luther sees the believer's union with Christ as the end result of faith. Faith is not merely an intellectual assent. It is trusting in God's grace to effect this union. Sin is thus the deviation from this trust leading us to various idols on which we think we can depend.⁹ Thus we see that this incorporation into Christ is dependent on the promise and the cleansing from sin. Luther further writes of the Eucharist as an expression of this union:

Christ appointed these two forms of bread and wine, rather than any other, as a further indication of the very union and fellowship which is in this sacrament. For there is no more intimate, deep, and indivisible union than the union of the food with him who is fed . . . Thus in the sacrament we become united with Christ, and are made one body with all the saints, so that Christ cares for us and acts on our behalf.¹⁰

Whatever we may think of Luther on the real presence of Christ in the Eucharist, the point we are making here is that 'justifying faith functions as the source of mystical union and theosis in the thought of Martin Luther'.¹¹ Luther also emphasises that this faith union is 'not a work that we can accomplish by our own effort, but is the result of the activity of the Holy Spirit mediated through the proclamation of the Word, the administration of the sacraments, in short, through the ministry of the church'.¹²

CALVIN

Calvin puts the union with Christ as the first thing of which we need to take note. In his *Institutes*, following the discourse on the union of the Father and Son, the benefits flowing to his creation must logically be implemented on the basis of union, and this union is between Christ and the human race. This Calvin stated right at the beginning of his third book. He wrote:

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.¹³

⁸ Quoted in J. Linman, 'Martin Luther: Little Christs for the World; Faith and Sacraments as Means to Theosis', in M. J. Christensen and J. A. Wittung (eds), *Partakers of the Divine Nature* (Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, Madison, 2007), pp. 191–2.

⁹ J. Linman, 'Martin Luther . . .', p. 192.

¹⁰ J. Linman, 'Martin Luther . . .', p. 195.

¹¹ J. Linman, 'Martin Luther . . .', p. 196.

¹² J. Linman, 'Martin Luther . . .', p. 192.

¹³ *Calvin's Institutes*, 3.1.1 (*Calvin: Institutes of the Christian Religion*, vol. 1, book 3, ch. 1, pt 1, J. T. McNeill [ed.], F. L. Battles [tr.], Westminster Pr., Philadelphia, 1960, p. 537).

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Like Luther, he sees justification not merely as an intellectual assent, but as union with Christ.¹⁴ He also uses terms like engrafting and possessing to express the union:

Nay, rather, however we may have been redeemed by Christ, until we are engrafted into his fellowship by the calling of the Father, we are both the heirs of darkness and death and the enemies of God.¹⁵

Engrafting is a biological term that Paul also used (Rom. 11:17). It connotes life and growth, and also includes the possibility of death. Perhaps this may be the preferred term and I think it is a very appropriate one.¹⁶ A graft taken from one part of the body of a living organism is destined to die as it has been deprived of its blood or nutrient supply. It can only live when it takes on nutrition from the host. It lives because the host is supplying the graft with the nutrients required for life, and not because of any property of the graft to derive those nutrients.

Therefore, for Christ ‘to share with us what he has received from the Father’, we need to possess Christ just as we are his special possession. Calvin wrote:

Do you wish, then, to attain righteousness in Christ? You must first possess Christ; but you cannot possess him without being made partaker in his sanctification, because he cannot be divided into pieces [1 Cor. 1:13]. Since, therefore, it is solely by expending himself that the Lord gives us these benefits to enjoy, he bestows both of them at the same time, the one never without the other.¹⁷

HUMANITY *IN SOLIDUM*¹⁸

In a paper given in 1998 by Ian Pennicook on ‘Jesus the Messiah: Messianic Truth’,¹⁹ it was pointed out that the understanding of Messiahship, the anointed one, involves a corporate identity. For example, about the victory of King David, he says:

The most significant of Israel’s kings to be ‘the anointed’ was, of course, David . . . The meaning of David’s ‘messiahship’ is then seen in the story of the conflict with Goliath. As the Lord’s anointed, David stands as one unique within Israel. His victory over Goliath is not illustrative but *vicarious*; that is, when David is victorious all Israel has triumphed.²⁰

So when Paul wrote so jubilantly in Ephesians on the blessings that are ‘in him’, the Messiah, he has in mind that these blessings are not available to us outside of him, thus the importance of the union, this corporate identification. Humanity now includes the incarnate Son of God, the Messiah. It is with this understanding of corporate humanity that Paul argues the human dichotomy in Adam and in Christ, ‘for as all die in Adam, so all will be made alive in Christ’ (1 Cor. 15:22).

¹⁴ ‘Thus, him whom he receives into union with himself the Lord is said to justify, because he cannot receive him into grace nor join him to himself unless he turns him from a sinner into a righteous man’ (*Calvin’s Institutes*, 3.11.21, p. 751).

¹⁵ *Calvin’s Institutes*, 3.14.6 (p. 773).

¹⁶ A personal bias.

¹⁷ *Calvin’s Institutes*, 3.16.1 (p. 798).

¹⁸ Latin, a legal term meaning ‘the whole’. Every person *in solidum* is potentially liable for the full payment. Contrast with *pro rata* where each is liable for his/her share.

¹⁹ Ian Pennicook, ‘Jesus the Messiah: Messianic Truth’, in *The Apostolic Faith in Today’s World*, NCTM Pastors’ School, 1998, pp. 63–73.

²⁰ Ian Pennicook, p. 64.

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Much has also been written on this subject, using the terms ‘deification’ and ‘theosis’. These are not terms favoured by the western church, but are much in vogue in the eastern orthodox churches. The western church is fearful of the connotation of man becoming divine when using those terms, but they prefer to explore the same issues under the title, ‘union with God’. Perhaps it may be the extreme individualism and rationality of the West that finds those terms unpalatable. And with the slant towards contractualism, there may be more affinity with the term ‘incorporation’. However, the orthodox theologians are more prepared to wrestle with the issues of using those terms than we do.²¹

A problem with our coming to terms with the union with Christ is the way our rationality has led to an anthropocentric theology. We start with the sin–grace dialectic and work our way towards a theology of redemption. With sin as the starting point, then the thought of the perfection in the union with God becomes frightening and we back away from it.²² Had our approach been like Paul in Ephesians by starting with who God is ‘before the foundation of the world’ (Eph. 1:4), and humanity *in solidum*, including the incarnate Son of God, then we may find the reality of union with Christ easier to comprehend.

While we may like to spell out more precisely what it is to be in Christ, it may be wise to avoid the path of defining this in mystical or psychological terms as those who like to go that way cannot even agree on what premises to base those approaches on, and how best to define those terms. Perhaps we may stay with Paul and simply call it a spiritual union (1 Cor. 15:44) without pinning it down to precise categories. The imageries above do help and we need to see that these images point beyond themselves to the reality they depict.²³

Much of our soteriology is cerebral or intellectual. We make much of believing and having faith as if that is the end point and the whole of soteriology. ‘John’s soteriology is necessarily perichoretic.’²⁴ Salvation and the whole work of Christ is to take humanity into the union that the Son has with the Father.

When Jesus prayed that we may be in the union that he has with his Father, he is saying to us that just as there is a giving and receiving in the Triune communion, so there is a giving and receiving in our communion with him and thus in our communion together as people who are in Christ. And this giving and receiving from one another is the tangible realisation of our being in Christ. Thus, we congregate in the local community of Christ’s people to express this reality of being in him. And this is the tangible experience of what it is to be in Christ. It is the *koinonia* of the local community. This will be the theme for Martin Bleby’s study this evening.

²¹ Kenneth Paul Wesche, ‘Eastern Orthodox Spirituality, Union with God in Theosis’, *Theology Today*, Apr. 1999, 56, 1, pp. 29–43.

²² N. R. Kerr, ‘St. Anselm: Theoria and the Doctrinal Logic of Perfection’, in M. J. Christensen and J. A. Wittung (eds), *Partakers of the Divine Nature* (Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, Madison, 2007), p. 184.

²³ P. Minear, *Images of the Church in the New Testament* (Lutterworth Press, London, 1961), pp. 222–3.

²⁴ D. Crump, ‘Re-examining the Johannine Trinity: Perichoresis or Deification?’ in *SJT*, 59(4): (2006), pp. 395–412. Quoted from p. 411.