

January 9, 2021

“Our Union with Christ”
Galatians 2:20

FCF: Not knowing who we are

PROPOSITION: (anchor) God has made us one with Christ.
(magnet) We must look to Him.

SCRIPTURE INTRODUCTION:

I’m not going to ask, “So, how was your Christmas and New Year’s?” By some of your faces, I can tell. Instead, I want to tell you why things went sideways. It’s because you did. Maybe not in all cases but in most. You were dissatisfied with the gift exchange, frustrated about who couldn’t make it, undone by the opinions expressed at the table, gorged by the food, drink, and bills. And you’re already disappointed with 2022. What happened? A misplaced identity.

We need not go down that road. We’re going to look at “union with Christ” - a neglected but essential topic - as a follow-up to our Advent series. The gifts - justification, sanctification, the indwelling Spirit, authority in spiritual conflict - how are they ours? Union with Christ.

SCRIPTURE READING: [Galatians 2:15-21](#)

PRAYER FOR ILLUMINATION

SERMON INTRODUCTION:

We have a serious problem. There is a crack in the foundation of our beliefs. It has to do with Santa Claus. Or rather how we think of Jesus as being like Santa Claus. Think with me. He comes, gives his gifts, leaves, and then that’s it. The point with Santa is not our relationship with him but our acquisitions from him, what we can get out of him. That’s why we like Santa.

That’s not the way it’s supposed to be with Jesus. He comes in a whole different way and for a whole different reason - to give the gift of Himself. Our text is driving on that very point. In the midst of this larger discussion in Galatians 2 on our standing with God being secured by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone, Paul is speaking to an even larger point. God has made us one with Christ. All of these great gifts we have received come because of that union.

This concept of our union with Christ is vitally important. One scholar came up with 216 separate occurrences where Paul speaks about this. That’s just Paul. Here are some ([READ](#)):

Believers are created in Christ, crucified with him, buried with him, baptized into Christ and his death, united with him in his resurrection, and seated with him in the heavenly places; Christ is formed in believers and dwells in our hearts; the church is the body of Christ; Christ is in us and we are in him; the church is one flesh with Christ; believers gain Christ and are found in him.

Many have written on this. One of the more striking remarks is from John Calvin ([READ](#)):

How do we receive those benefits which the Father bestowed on his only-begotten Son—not for Christ’s own private use, but that he might enrich poor and needy men? 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.

So God has made us one with Christ. How should we then respond? We must look to Him.

Let’s consider three things Paul says in our text. First, how we are united to Christ’s death. Second, how we are united to Christ’s life. Third, how we are united to Christ by faith.

I. UNITED TO CHRIST’S DEATH

First, we are united to Christ in His death ([READ Galatians 2:20a](#)). Quite a statement.

A) Not in the Historical Moment

Not that Paul is saying he was physically there in the historical moment of Good Friday.

1. Paul not present

He was not one of the two thieves crucified with Jesus. He was likely not even in Jerusalem.

2. Alive as he was writing

And now 15-20 years later, he is alive and writing this letter. So he was not physically present.

B) But in a Representative Sense

And yet note again what Paul says (**READ Galatians 2:20a**). What then does he mean?

1. Christ's appointment

We have to look back to before time began when Christ was appointed as the representative for His people. This unity, this union, is the sole basis for His having then lived and died for us.

2. Christ's death

(**READ Romans 5:18-19**) In Adam, we received condemnation and death. But in Christ, we receive justification and life. Because of this union, Paul is saying we died with Christ. We were crucified with Christ. Think of this. He was there for us. And we were there with Him.

This is what it means to speak of our being united to Christ, one with Him in His death.

Illustration:

Think in terms of a power of attorney. This is the legal paperwork that allows one person to act on another's behalf as their representative, just as if they had carried out a task themselves. That's a partial glimpse of what this union entails, especially in its legal forensic context.

Application:

(**READ Galatians 2:20a**) Let's consider two things here, two things that are put to death with our death. The first is the end of pride. Our merits and accomplishments have no currency with God. Our competition and comparisons are over. We died with Christ. God cares nothing for the merits of the dead. Which can be humbling. Which gets to the many of our divisions.

That's the first thing, the end of pride. The second thing is the end of despair. For God does not hold our failures against us. Again, we died with Christ. You cannot accuse a corpse or hold it liable for anything. Which means we are finally free to acknowledge our wrong, to admit our fault, and to confess our sin. And that is what can open the door towards reconciliation.

For God has made us one with Christ - united to Him in His death. We must look to Him.

II. UNITED TO CHRIST'S LIFE

But there is a sequel. We are also united to Christ in His life (**READ Galatians 2:20a-b**).

A) Not a Denial of Personality

What does Paul mean? Clearly, this is not a denial of his individual personality.

1. Clear in Paul's history

We can see that in Paul's history, his life and writings. Paul did not disappear. He was restored.

2. Confusion in Eastern mysticism

This is not the type of union spoken of in Eastern mysticism, an absorption into the divine.

B) But a Living Spiritual Union

Paul is not speaking of a denial of personality but a living spiritual union with Christ.

1. Christ's obedience is ours

This unity with Christ means His obedience, His record, is already ours. He both died and lived for us. In the definitive sense, our sanctification is an accomplished reality. Because we are in Him, the Holy One, we are already holy. Ours is to then lay hold of and live out of that reality. For Christ's obedience is ours. That is what makes us holy already now in a definitive sense.

2. Christ's life is ours

Yet Christ's life is ours as well. This is what enables us to become holy in a progressive sense. This is how we work out our salvation, how we become more of what we are, as we look to Him. There is not just a legal side to this union. There is a vital side as well ([READ John 15:1-5](#)).

We are united to Christ's life. Both His record and His life are now ours. Think of this.

Application:

([READ Galatians 2:20a-b](#)) It helps to read Paul's life and the book of Acts with this lens. It's what helps us to make sense of the vitality of the early church. Something supernatural had broken out into the lives of these people. And nothing has changed. Christ's life is still ours.

His life is still ours. Think as to how that can change our response to His call to trust and obey His commands or to serve and submit to His paths. That call can now land on us in a whole new way. We need not filter it with dread and defeat but embrace it with hopeful anticipation.

For God has made us one with Christ - united to Him in His life. We must look to Him.

III. UNITED TO CHRIST BY FAITH

Which takes us to this. What does this look like? A life of faith ([READ Galatians 2:20](#)).

A) Paul's Personal Experience

Paul is giving us a window here into his personal experience. Which is quite instructive.

1. The role of faith

We live by faith - not just as to how we enter the Christian life but how we are enabled to live it.

2. Faith in Christ

Specifically, faith in Christ, the Son of God. ([READ Galatians 2:20c](#)) There is a present force to this - the life he "now" lives. This is done in an ongoing, continual way. And it is personally felt. Note the personal pronouns. Paul knows himself to be the object of Christ's eternal love.

B) A Necessary Reminder

This is his experience and we are to learn from it. Especially as a necessary reminder.

1. The pressures faced

For there are pressures we will face. This is a life lived in "the flesh" - pointing to our weakness and a struggle. We have to constantly do battle with doubts fed by the world's counter narrative.

2. The immediate context

And we see this in the immediate context of these very words as Paul is having to counter against Peter and Barnabas as they themselves had slid back into hypocritical legalism. The gospel is a foreign language to us. It has a whole different kind of grammar. We have so much to unlearn.

This life of union with Christ has to be lived out by faith in Christ. And it is a new life.

Illustration:

In 1976, Lt. Viktor Belenko of the Soviet Air Defense Forces broke from a training flight and flew his MIG-25 Foxbat to Hokodate Airport in Japan. He was taken into custody and requested political asylum in the United States. This was the height of the Cold War. From here out, he was no longer under Russian rule. He would become an American citizen. It was a total break. But he had much to unlearn, doubtless having to look at his papers to know who he was.

Application:

That's something of a picture of our having died and been made alive in Christ. There is a definitive and progressive side to this new life. And that is lived out in faith. That's what Paul is getting at here. Ours is a changeless status. Nothing we do or fail to do can undo that. And a changed ability. Christ's presence and power are within us. We are new creatures being made new by the Holy Spirit as He applies and works the gospel into our hearts. And we are changed.

God has made us one with Christ. And we must look to Him, living this out by faith.

CONCLUSION:

You may ask, "Why have I not heard this before? Why so few books, such little teaching, such a poor understanding of this?" There are at least a couple of reasons. First, it's hard to capture. This union is mostly spoken of through imagery in the Bible, often like a marriage (far more than a court). Some have said that union with Christ is like a necklace - adorned with such jewels as justification, sanctification, adoption, and glorification. But the strand that holds them together is this union. The point being this requires imagination. Which makes us nervous.

That's one reason we don't hear enough about this. But a second reason is simply that it's not safe. It sounds dangerous. After all, the message is "You are in Christ. And Christ is in you." But if you really take all that seriously, it comes with an obligation to respond. Pushing even further, we have the ability to respond. Yet quite often we'd rather be left alone. Miserable though we are, we'd rather be undisturbed and keep all this business at a distance. It's too much.

Well, at the risk of sounding a bit cheeky, how's that working for you? Take an inventory of your spiritual life, of your relationship with God and the people around you. Perhaps we really do need to hear this good news. Yes, it calls for a change of thinking. And, yes, that can be a bit disruptive. But if it's true to Scripture, we need to be disrupted and desperately so.

God has made us one with Christ. Think of it - one with Christ. We must look to Him.

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