

The Blessings of Union with Christ

By Matt Perman

I. Definition:

“Union with Christ is a phrase used to summarize several different relationships between believers and Christ, through which Christians receive every benefit of salvation. These relationships include the fact that we are in Christ, He is in us, we are like Christ, and we are with Christ.”¹

A. How it relates to all of the various aspects of our salvation in general.

“Union with Christ is really the central truth of the whole doctrine of salvation not only in its application, but also in its once-for-all accomplishment in the finished work of Christ. Indeed the whole process of salvation has its origin in one phase of union with Christ, and salvation has in view the realization of other phases of union with Christ....Union with Christ is the central truth of the whole doctrine of salvation.”²

B. How it relates to adoption in particular.

While adoption is the pinnacle of our blessing and privilege, “...we cannot think of adoption apart from union with Christ. It is significant that the election in Christ before the foundation of the world is election unto the adoption of sons....Union with Christ reaches its zenith in adoption, and adoption has its orbit in union with Christ.”³

II. Everything that God does is in Christ, and thus it is Christ-centered.

A. God’s redeeming plan for the whole universe is in Christ. Col 1.20; Eph 1.9-12.

B. God’s specific redeeming plan for His elect is in Christ.

1. God’s love is located in Christ: Rom 8.39.
2. God’s grace is in Christ: 2Tim 2.1.
3. Salvation is in Christ: 2Tim 2.10.
4. All Saints are in Christ: Phi 1.1.

C. The result? “*This was* in accordance with the eternal purpose which He carried out in Christ Jesus our Lord,” Eph 3.11; “to the end that we who were the first to hope in Christ would be to the praise of His glory,” Eph 1.12.

D. What are the implications of this?

1. If you are in Christ, you partake of all of the blessings that are in Him, such as God’s love, God’s grace, and eternal life. We’ll examine this more specifically below.
2. The only way to possess these blessings is through Christ. Thus, no one can have these things without also having Christ through faith.
3. We should never conceive of anything good, nor of any aspect of our salvation, apart from our Lord Jesus Christ.

¹ Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, p. 840.

² John Murray, *Redemption Accomplished and Applied*, pp. 161 and 170.

³ Murray, p. 170.

III. Our union with Christ is the core of our salvation: *everything involved in the fullness of our salvation is in Christ, and thus flows from our union with Him.*

- Every spiritual blessing is in Christ: Eph 1.3.
- Salvation itself is in Christ: 2Tim 2.10.
- Our completeness is in Christ: Col 2.10.
- Everything we need is in Christ: 1Cor 1.30.

IV. Our union with Christ stretches from eternity to eternity, though not in the same way.

How can Eph 1.4 say that we were in Christ from eternity past, and yet 2.12 says that before conversion we were “separate from Christ”?

The answer is that there are two different modes of union with Christ: **objective** union and **subjective** union.

Objective union: This is the union we have had with Christ from all eternity past, and while He was on earth. Since this union existed before we believed, and even before we existed, it is a *legal union*; but it is not an *experiential union*.

A. It is a union with Christ in God’s eternal decrees, and thus we have had many blessings from eternity past.

1. When the Father chose us to be holy and blameless, He thought of us as in union with Christ: Eph 1.4.
2. When the Father predestined us to be adopted, He did so through Christ: Eph 1.5.
3. God predestined us to believe as the means to receive these benefits: 2Tim 1.9; 2The 2.13.

B. It is a union with Christ as our federal head, or our *legal* representative. While Christ was on earth, and even now and forever, we were (and are) in Christ by God’s sovereign appointment of Him as our federal head. The concept of federal representation is very important because it is integral to so many aspects of our salvation.

1. Adam was our representative in the Garden of Eden *unto death*. His sin was regarded by God as our sin, because we are flesh of his flesh. But Christ was sent by God as the last Adam (1Cor 15.45-47), to represent God’s elect *unto eternal life*. He perfectly obeyed God’s law, and fully atoned for our sins on our behalf. God regards His obedience and atonement as ours. Thus, “as in Adam all die, so in Christ all will be made alive.” (1Cor 15.22).
2. Whatever else Christ did as our representative, God counted it as something we did too.
 - We died with Christ: 2Cor 5.14.
 - We were raised with Christ: Eph 2.6.
 - We were seated in heaven with Christ: Eph 2.6.
3. Thus, God can credit Christ’s righteousness to us and our sins to Him: 2Cor 5.21.
 - Our *redemption* is in Christ: Rom 3.24.
 - Our *righteousness* is in Christ: 1Cor 1.30.
 - Our *sanctification* is in Christ: 1Cor 1.30;
 - The *forgiveness* of our sins is in Christ: Eph 1.7.
 - There is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ: Rom 8.1.
 - And we are found in Christ *through faith*: Phi 3.9.
 - Therefore, we are *justified* by faith in Christ: Gal 2.16.

“The work of Christ has direct bearing on our salvation, essentially because of our union with His person. If we were not viewed as being in union with Christ when He lived and died, then His life and death could never save us. His death and resurrection, if not viewed as being vicarious and substitutionary by virtue of our union with Him, would be absolutely meaningless.”⁴

Subjective union: Whereas *objective* union is a *legal* union, *subjective* union is *experiential*. It is the personal connection and union we have with Christ upon believing, and it continues forever into the future. It is through this union that we receive and enjoy the blessings secured for us by means of our objective union with Him.

A. Our subjective union is based upon, and was secured by the objective union.

“When Christ returned to heaven, therefore, all the blessings of salvation were earned for us. God thought of these blessings as being rightfully ours, just as if we had earned them ourselves. Nevertheless, they were stored up for us in heaven in God’s mind, actually, and in Christ our representative, waiting to be applied to us *personally*.”⁵

That is, they were waiting to be applied to us in our subjective union with him. Because the Father chose us in Christ *objectively*, and “appointed us to eternal life,” we will come to believe in Christ *subjectively* (Act 13.48). Because we believers have died with Christ *objectively* (2Cor 5.14) we will be raised with Christ *subjectively* (Rom 6.8).

B. Thus, as Robert Morey points out in the quotation above, *objective union* concerns the plan and accomplishment of redemption; whereas *subjective union* concerns the application of that redemption.

All of the remaining blessings that we will examine in this study, most directly concern our *subjective* union.

V. Our new life of holiness is through our union with Him.

- We are born again in Christ, “created anew” in Him: Eph 2.10.
- We are new creatures in Christ: 2Cor 5.17.
- We have new life in Christ: Rom 6.4.
- We subjectively died with Christ at conversion — “crucified with Him” and “buried with Him in baptism”: Rom 6.6; Col 2.12. *This gives us power over sin.*
- We have subjectively been raised with Christ, made alive with Him, and seated in heaven with Him: Col 3.1; Eph 2.5-6. *This gives us power to obey.*

VI. Everything we need for living out our salvation, is in Christ.

- Christ is our wisdom and our sanctification: 1Cor 1.30.
- We have been taught by him, as the Truth is in Jesus: Eph 4.21.
- In Christ are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge: Col 2.3.
- In Christ there is encouragement, consolation of love, fellowship of the Spirit, affection and compassion: Phi 2.1.
- Faith and love are found in Christ Jesus: 1Tim 1.14.
- In everything we are enriched in Him, in all speech and knowledge: 1Cor 1.5.

⁴ Robert Morey, *Studies in the Atonement*, p. 92.

⁵ Grudem, p. 842.

VII. Everything that we do, should be done *in Christ*.

A. What does it mean to do something “in Christ”?

It means doing something in the power of Christ, and for the honor of Christ. It involves acting with one purpose with Christ, in that your desire is that His name be honored, and that the church be benefitted.

B. Paul’s actions were done in Christ. He...

- Spoke the truth in Christ: Rom 9.1; 2Cor 2.17.
- Was proud of his work in Christ: Rom 15.17; 1Cor 15.31.
- Reminded the Christians of His ways in Christ: 1Cor 4.17.
- Hoped in Christ in his plans: Phi 2.19.
- Rejoiced in the Lord: Phi 4.10.
- Commanded, beseeched, and exhorted Christians in the Lord: 1Th 4.1; 2Th 3.12; Phm 8.
- Could do all things through Him who strengthens us: Phi 4.13.

C. In addition to learning from Paul’s example, there are many things we are specifically commanded to do *in Christ*, or *in the Lord*:

- We are to labor for His kingdom: 1Cor 15.58.
- Children are to obey parents: Eph 6.1,
- Wives are to submit to their husbands: Col 3.18.
- We are to be strong in the Lord: Eph 6.10.
- We are to rejoice in the Lord: Phi 3.10.
- We are to agree in the Lord: Phi 4.2.
- We are to stand firm in the Lord: Phi 4.1; 1The 3.8.
- We are to live a godly life in the Lord: 2Tim 3.12.
- We are to have good behavior in the Lord: 1Pet 3.16.
- We can be approved in the Lord: Rom 16.10.
- We are to work hard in the Lord: Rom 16.12.
- We may be made confident in the Lord: Phi 1.14.
- We are to abide in Christ: 1Joh 2.28; 3.6.
- We are to walk (conduct ourselves) in the Lord: Col 2.6.
- In Christ we have boldness and confident access to the Father: Eph 3.12.

VIII. Union with Christ involves close fellowship with Christ

- We are one spirit with the Lord: 1Cor 6.17.
- Our physical bodies are members of Christ: 1Cor 6.15.
- Therefore, our bodies are a temple of the Holy Spirit who is in us: 1Cor 6.19.
- As members of Christ’s body, He cherishes and nourishes us: Eph 5.29-30.
- We were called in the Lord: 1Cor 7.22.
- We were called into fellowship with Christ: 1Cor 1.9.
- Christ is in us, the hope of glory; He indwells us by His Spirit: Rom 8.9-11; Col 1.27.

“To overlook this truth would be to neglect the great source of spiritual strength we have within us (1Joh 4.4). To remember it, destroys our pride, gives us a constant feeling of dependence on Christ, and gives us great confidence, not in self but in Christ working in us.”⁶

⁶ Grudem, p. 845.

IX. Through Christ, all believers are united with one another as one spiritual body, and thus we have deep unity and fellowship.

- Believers are the body of Christ, and individually members of one another; thus we are united to each other through Christ: 1Cor 12.27; Rom 12.5.
- Thus, if one member suffers, we should suffer along with it, and if one member is honored, we should rejoice with it: 1Cor 12.26.
- Unity among believers is in Christ: Rom 15.5; Gal 3.28; 6.15; Eph 2.13.
- Believers are growing into a holy temple in the Lord: Eph 2.21-22.
- God dwells in and among His people, by His Spirit: Eph 2.22.
This shows our dependence upon one another.
- Local churches are “in the Father, and in Christ,” imitating them: 1The 1.1; 2.14.

X. All of the blessings pertaining to our hope for the future are in Christ.

- We die in the Lord: 1The 4.14, 16.
- We will be resurrected (“made alive”) in Christ: 1Cor 15.22.
- In Christ we have obtained an inheritance: Eph 1.11.
- Because we are children of God, we are heirs of the kingdom with Christ: Rom 8.17.
- When Christ returns, we “will be revealed with Him in glory”: Col 3.4.
- When we suffer, we do so with Christ, partaking in the divine nature: Rom 8.17; 2Pet 1.3-4.
- The purpose is that we may be glorified with Christ: Rom 8.17.
- In the ages to come, God will show the surpassing riches of His grace in kindness towards us in Christ: Eph 2.5-7.
- We will be like Christ when He returns: 1Joh 3.2.

XI. What exactly is the nature of this union? To what can it be compared?

Scriptural illustrations of the union:⁷

- The union that exists because of Christ between believers is compared with the union between the three Persons of the Trinity: John 14.23; 17.21-23.
What does this analogy tell us about our union with Christ?
- Our union with Christ and one another is compared to the stones of a building with Christ the chief cornerstone; or to living stones in a spiritual house: Eph 2.19-22; 1Pet 2.4-5.
What does this analogy tell us about our union with one another?
- It is compared to the union between man and wife: Eph 5.22-23.
What does this reveal about the intimacy of our union?
- It is compared to the union between the head and other members of the body: Eph 4.15-16.
What does this reveal about the necessity of our union?
- It is compared to the relation of the vine to the branches: John 15.
What does this reveal about the nature of the union?
- We must remember that Scripture is using analogies (like), not identities (same).

For “just as we may not reduce the union between Christ and his people to the level of the union that exists [between stones], so we must not raise it to the level of the union that exists within the Godhead... Union with Christ does not mean that we are incorporated into the life of the Godhead.”⁸

⁷ This section draws largely from Murray, p. 168.

⁸ Murray, p. 168.

- The Holy Spirit is the initiator and sustainer of the union: 1Cor 12.13; cf. Rom 8.9-13.

XII. Union with Christ brings us union with,

- A. the Father (Joh 14.23; 17.20-23), and
- B. the Holy Spirit (Joh 14.16-17; Rom 8.9).

APPLICATIONS:

- Union with Christ is central to the way we view our identity.
- Union with Christ is central to the way we view Christ, for we must never separate Christ from His people. Christ is close to His people, and thus we see His love more manifested.
- Union with Christ is central to the way we view our security.
- It keeps our perspective on life and salvation thoroughly Christ-centered.
- It shows us our dependence on Christ more fully, and thus makes us trust in Him more.
- It shows that salvation is wholly from the Lord and not at all from ourselves.
- Because salvation was accomplished *by* Christ, all blessings of salvation are located *in* Christ. Because all blessings of salvation are located *in* Christ, all blessings of salvation come *from* Christ. Therefore, all of the blessings that we receive are a share in Christ's very own blessings. That is, it is not just "joy" we experience when we rejoice in the Lord, but Christ's very own joy, the same joy that He has, for it is from Him. When we love one another, it is Christ's very own love that is working through us. Therefore, what a close and intimate relationship we have with Christ!
- It shows us our unity and dependence upon one another more, and thus should make us strive to experience more fully the deep fellowship and unity of purpose that comes through our common union with Christ.
- Our corporate union with Christ as a church should help make us less individualistic.

"What is it that binds past and present and future together in the life of faith and in the hope of glory? Why does the believer entertain the thought of God's determinate counsel with such joy? Why can he have patience in the perplexities and adversities of the present? Why can he have confident assurance with reference to the future and rejoice in hope of the glory of God? It is because he cannot think of past, present, or future apart from union with Christ."⁹

"It is out of the measureless fullness of grace and truth, of wisdom and power, of goodness and love, of righteousness and faithfulness which reside in [Christ], that God's people draw for all their needs in this life, and for the hope of the life to come. There is no truth, therefore, more suited to impart confidence and strength, comfort and joy in the Lord, than this one of union with Christ."¹⁰

Are you seeing more clearly the massive importance of predestination? Without predestination, the whole stability, continuity, and foundation of our union with Christ breaks down. For without predestination, we could not have been objectively in Christ from eternity past, and neither could He have been our personal representative while on earth.

Without predestination, our union with Christ would no longer be eternal and wholly dependent upon God, and thus would not be very strong. But thanks be to God, because of predestination, our union with Christ is solid from eternity past to eternity future.

⁹ Murray, p. 164.

¹⁰ Murray, p. 165.

Predestination, coupled with union with Christ, shows that the church is strong, because every individual member of the church has been in union with Christ from all eternity as part of the whole community. There is no stone that God intends to place in His church that will fail to be placed. For every stone, and thus the whole building, has been infallibly predestined to its position. Thus, we see that the church which we are a part of is not weak, but very strong and stable. Believing this will in turn make us strong and stable people.

“We thus see that union with Christ has its source in the election of God the Father before the foundation of the world, and it has its fruition in the glorification of the sons of God. The perspective of God’s people is not narrow; it is broad and it is long. It is not confined to space and time; it has the expanse of eternity. Its orbit has two *foci* – one the electing love of God the Father in the counsels of eternity; the other, glorification with Christ in the manifestation of his glory. The former has no beginning; the latter has no end.”¹¹

Because our earthly lives fall within such a perspective, they have meaning and hope.

¹¹ Murray, p. 164.

Biblical Passages on the Blessings of Union With Christ

By Matt Perman

Christ is the center of our salvation

- God's love is located in Christ: Rom 8.39.
- God's grace is in Christ: 2Tim 2.1.
- Salvation is in Christ: 2Tim 2.10.
- Eternal life is in Christ: 1Joh 5.11; 2Tim 1.1.
- Everything pertaining to salvation is found in Christ and thus comes from Him: 1Cor 1.30.
- All the saints are in Christ: Phi 1.1.
- In Christ we are blessed with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places: Eph 1.3.
- We are in Christ by God's doing: 1Cor 1.27-30.

There are at least two implications from the fact that everything in regard to salvation is in Christ:

1. If you are a believer in Christ, you are in Him and thus partake of all of these benefits.
2. Since the blessings of salvation are all in Christ, there is no other way to receive them other than through faith in Him. Thus, those who do not believe in Him, do not share in these blessings.

Every single aspect and dimension of our salvation is found in Christ and thus comes from Christ.

Blessings from before creation:

- God's grace was given us in Christ before creation, totally apart from our own initiative: 2Tim 1.9.
- The Father chose us in Christ before creation, to be holy and blameless: Eph 1.4.
- Through Christ and with love the Father predestined us to adoption as sons: Eph 1.5.

Blessings won by Christ during His earthly life and received upon conversion:

- The Father's grace is freely bestowed on us in Christ, whom He loves: Eph 1.6.
- We were created anew, born again in Christ: Eph 2.10; Col 2.11-12.
- Those who are in Christ are new creatures: 2Cor 5.17.
- All believers are sealed in Christ with the Holy Spirit from the first moment of saving faith: Eph 1.13.
- In Christ we have been brought near to God by His blood: Eph 2.13.
- Our redemption is in Christ: Rom 3.24; Eph 1.7; Col 1.14.
- Thus, the forgiveness of our sins is in Christ: Eph 1.7; Col 1.14.
- Therefore, being in Christ removes us from all condemnation: Rom 8.1.
- As Adam brought condemnation upon all humans by his disobedience as our federal head, so also Christ has brought justification upon all believers by His obedience as our federal head: Rom 5.12-21.
- Righteousness is in Christ: 1Cor 1.30.
- Being found in Christ by faith clothes us in His righteousness: Phi 3.9.
- Thus, believers have become the righteousness of God in Christ: 2Cor 5.21.
- Therefore, we are justified in Christ: Gal 2.16.
- Because of this, we have liberty in Christ: Gal 2.4.

- We have been sanctified in Christ: 1Cor 1.2.
- We died with Christ: Col 2.11-14; Rom 6.3, 8.
- Our old self was crucified with Him so that we are no longer slaves of sin: Rom 6.6.
- Because we have died with Christ, we will be raised from the dead in union with Christ: Rom 6.4-5.
- The Father has in a certain sense already raised us up with Christ: Eph 2.5-6; Col 2.13; 3.1.
- The Father seated us with Him in the heavenly places in Christ: Eph 2.6.

Blessings concerning our hope for the future:

- Christians die in the Lord: 1The 4.14, 16.
- In Christ we will be resurrected, “made alive”: 1Cor 15.22.
- In Christ we have obtained an inheritance: Eph 1.11.
- We are heirs with Christ because we are children of God: Rom 8.17.
- When Christ returns, we will be revealed with Him in glory: Col 3.4.
- Thus, Christ in us is the hope of glory: Col 1.27.
- When we suffer, we do so with Christ: Rom 8.17.
- The result is that we will be glorified with Christ: Rom 8.17.
- In the ages to come, God will show the surpassing riches of His grace in kindness towards us in Christ: Eph 2.7.
- Preservation (perseverance) is in Christ: Rom 8.35, 39; 2Cor 1.21-22.

Everything we need for living out our salvation is in Christ

- Christ is our sanctification: 1Cor 1.30.
- Truth is in Jesus: Eph 4.21.
- In Christ are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge: Col 2.3.
- Christ is our wisdom: 1Cor 1.30.
- In Christ there is encouragement, consolation of love, fellowship of the Spirit, affection and compassion: Phi 2.1.
- Faith and love are found in Christ: 1Tim 1.14.
- Our spiritual gifts are considered enrichment in Christ: 1Cor 1.5.
- God’s riches in glory are in Christ, and He can meet all of our needs with them: Phi 4.19.
- In Christ we are complete: Col 2.10.

We are to do everything in Christ

- We are to walk (live our lives) in Christ: Col 2.6.
- We are to be firmly rooted and built up in Christ: Col 2.7.
- We are to do everything in the name of Christ: Col 3.17.
- We can hope in the Lord to accomplish our plans: Phi 2.19.
- We are to stand firm in the Lord: Phi 4.1; 1The 3.8.
- We are to rejoice in the Lord: Phi 4.4.
- We are to be strong in the Lord: Eph 6.10.
- Always pray, rejoice, and give thanks, for this is God’s will for us in Christ: 1The 5.16-18.
- We can exhort people in the Lord: 2The 3.12.
- Our goal in ministry should be to present everyone complete in Christ: Col 1.28.
- We have boldness and confident access to the Father, through faith in Christ: Eph 3.12.
- We are to live a godly life in the Lord: 2Tim 3.12.
- We are to have “good behavior in Christ”: 1Pet 3.16.
- We can work hard in the Lord: Rom 16.12.

- We can be made confident in the Lord: Phi 1.14.
- We can be approved in the Lord: Rom 16.10.
- We are to abide in Christ: Joh 15.4; 1Joh 2.28; 3.6.
- In Christ we can labor for His kingdom: 1Cor 15.58.
- In the Lord, children are to obey parents: Eph 6.1.
- In the Lord, wives are to submit to their husbands: Col 3.18.
- We can do all things through (in) the Lord: Phi 4.13.

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- Our spirits are united to Christ: 1Cor 6.17.
- Our physical bodies are in union with Christ: 1Cor 6.15.
- Therefore, our bodies are a temple of the Holy Spirit who is in us: 1Cor 6.19.
- We belong to Christ because by His death He bought us both physically and spiritually – 1Cor 6.20; 7.23.
- Because we are members of Christ’s body, He cherishes and nourishes us: Eph 5.29-30.
- We were called in the Lord: 1Cor 7.22.
- We were called into fellowship with Christ: 1Cor 1.9.
- Christ is in us, the hope of glory; He indwells us by His Spirit: Rom 8.9-11; Col 1.27.

Through Christ, all believers are united with one another as one spiritual body

- Believers are Christ’s body, and thus we are united to each other through Christ: Rom 12.5; 1Cor 12.27.
- Thus, if one member suffers, we should suffer along with it, and if one member is honored, we should rejoice with it: 1Cor 12.26.
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- God dwells in and among His people, by His Spirit: Eph 2.22.
- Local churches are “in the Father, and in Christ,” imitating them: 1The 1.1; 2.14.

The Cosmic Dimension: Christ is the center of God’s redeeming purpose for the whole universe

- God’s will and His good pleasure behind it, is purposed by God in Christ: Eph 1.9.
- God’s aim is to sum up all things in Christ: Eph 1.10.
- God carried out His eternal purpose in Christ: Eph 3.11.
- To the Father is the glory in the church and in Christ forever: Eph 3.21

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formatting, corrections, and clarifications,
 by William H. Gross www.onthewing.org 12/23/2022