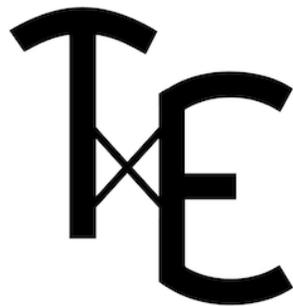




# THEOLOGICAL ROUNDTABLE 2025

THE MYSTERY OF UNION  
WITH CHRIST



October 14-16, 2025

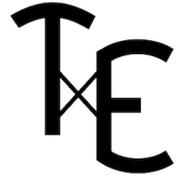
Tesoro Escondido Ranch | Mineral Wells, Texas

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# Theological Roundtable 2025



Dudley Hall  
Kerygma Ventures, Colleyville, Texas

## ECHOES OF UNION WITH CHRIST FROM THE UPPER ROOM

There should be no hint of controversy regarding union-life in Christ. The overwhelming message of the New Testament is that salvation is sharing the life of the Son. It is mysterious and beyond our capacity to understand rationally. But the reality of sharing the life of Christ is the greatest hope the Christian has for victory today and vindication for the future. We shall focus on the text in John's gospel that describes the upper room event just prior to Jesus's betrayal, crucifixion, and resurrection. Celebrating the ancient feast of Passover, Jesus and His disciples met and ate together while Jesus explained what would be the nature of their relationship after His physical departure. The event is described in John chapters thirteen through seventeen.

First, I should tell a little of my own story regarding this subject. Shortly after answering the specific call of Jesus to preach the gospel, I was given some books about the Holy Spirit's internal work in believers. I read the works of Watchman Nee, Ian Thomas, F.B. Meyer, Andrew Murray, L. E. Maxwell, and others of that train of thought. I met Bertha Smith while in college and enjoyed a close relationship with her until her death. These weren't the only books I read, but they did provide a voice that added to the more reformed authors that claimed my attention. I had the privilege of spending a whole day with Norman Grubb whose biography of Rees Howells, the intercessor, had inspired me. There was much in those people I did not understand, but there was a common sound of authenticity that compelled me to seek the intimacy of Spirit that they reflected. I continued to hear, "I have been crucified with Christ; and it is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me." Though I enjoyed the propositional doctrines of the reformation and rejoiced in the soundness of truth that can be embraced with mind and spirit, I could never accept the idea that the gospel was about a change in status alone. I rejoiced with Luther and Calvin in the legal justification that is ours because of the cross, but I could not shake the hope that Christ's death and resurrection was also experiential.

It could be argued that the emphasis on the rational and forensic aspects of the gospel was a reaction to the mysticism of allegorical catholic doctrine that had taken the church into the dark ages. The light of the Reformation shone bright on the truths that had been distorted and the sheep who had been deceived. Some were afraid of the possible

excesses that might arise if the subjective side of the gospel was emphasized. But leaders like Luther and Calvin believed deeply in the salvation that is the very transfer of life to the believer. Calvin spoke of the delightful mystery regarding union life with Christ.

*For my own part, I am overwhelmed by the depth of this mystery and not ashamed to join Paul in acknowledging at once my ignorance and my admiration. How much more satisfactory would this be than to follow my carnal judgment, in undervaluing what Paul declares to be a deep mystery! Reason itself teaches how we ought to act in such matters; for whatever is supernatural is clearly beyond our own comprehension. Let us therefore labor more to feel Christ living in us, than to discover the nature of that intercourse (Marcus Peter Johnson, *One With Christ*, Page 49 quoting from Calvin, commentaries, Ephesians 5:32).*

In recent decades, the Charismatic Movement has given some who are fearful of too much feeling and subjectivity an opportunity to effectively ignore or at least diminish the focus on enjoying God's life now through the Holy Spirit. The idea of denying certain gifts of the Spirit and arbitrarily deciding which ones are valid today reveals a shallow understanding of the nature of New Testament salvation. It is not just the legal forgiveness of a debt, nor the addition of names to the book of life. Salvation is nothing short of being given the very life of the resurrected Christ. We don't just get the legal benefits, nor just the positional privileges. We, by the living Spirit, are made alive with His life. We are not only identified with Him in His obedient life, His death on the cross, His victory over death, and His rule at the Father's right hand, but we cry "Abba! Father!" The eternal seed of the Word is planted in our deepest part and it grows, making us conscious of our inheritance. We have been, in reality, changed from foreign rebels to children of God with full benefits now and forever.

Let's see if we can validate such a view from the scriptures as we examine the Upper Room Discourse. To do so we take the whole Gospel of John as context. John connects the incarnation of Jesus with the original creation. Both are equally the most significant events in history. "In the beginning..." God creates everything. "In the beginning..." was the Word. John's focus is on the new life that appears on earth in the arrival of Jesus. It is a new kind of life, different and greater than the bios kind of life that makes up creation. He uses "Zoe" to distinguish it from biological, natural, physical life. He chooses several events in Jesus' life that show the difference. They are signs that God has acted in history and brought a new kind of life, and Jesus demonstrated it. The intent becomes obvious as we continue to read. He has purposed to save His elect by giving them a new life. And it is the life of the Son. It is astonishing, but true. Humans who previously hid behind bushes have privileges that only the eternal Son has enjoyed.

John tells about the wine of the new covenant at the marriage in Cana. He projects a new temple as He cleanses the physical one with a whip. He offers a new kind of water to a woman at the well. He displays the wholeness of the eternal life as He heals the man at Bethesda. He uses bread to foreshadow the eternal sustenance in feeding the crowds. He walks on the water to reveal the possibilities of faith. He gives sight to a man born blind to show the spiritual sight that comes with eternal life. Then He reveals that He is the resurrection and the life by raising Lazarus. Of course all of this was done in the presence of unbelieving Jews who are blind to the invisible reality of the kingdom that was among them. They plot to kill Him, but He rides into Jerusalem on a donkey to the consternation of both the Jews and the confused disciples. When the Greeks showed up wanting to see Him, he recognized that the time of His glorification was at hand. A transition had come. The signs had been done in their midst. The teaching was clear for those with a believing heart. The big day of judgment was dawning. Jesus summarized His teaching and living:

*“Whoever believes in me believes not in me but in him who sent me. And whoever sees me sees him who sent me...The one who rejects me and does not receive my word has a judge; on the last day the word that I have spoken will serve as judge, for I have not spoken on my own, but the Father who sent me has himself given me a commandment about what to say and what to speak. John 12:44, 48-49*

Public ministry as such was over. Jesus turns to His disciples to prepare them for the confusing days just ahead and for life after His ascension. In His closing summary, He had strongly emphasized the “union-nature” of His relationship with the Father. The Upper Room Discourse was all about getting them to see how eternal life works. He shared the life of the Father, and they would share it as well. Throughout the Passover meal, Jesus demonstrated the life that He was giving them. He knew the will of the Father and He loved with the Father’s love. This capacity would pass on to the disciples when Jesus left. He had loved them with the Father’s love, and they would continue to express that same love toward others just as they saw Him doing. Peter had a good amount of the old love and believed it was enough to take him through severe temptation. Jesus assured him that his level of love was not sufficient. Later he received it.

Jesus took time to explain why He would soon be leaving and what was really happening while they watched the horror of the unjust trial, cruel death, and the mourning of all who loved Him. He said He was going to the Father to prepare them a place with the Father. They were still thinking in terms of geography while He was describing a relationship of sharing the space and life of the Father and Son. They had of course seen Him, but didn’t recognize that they were also seeing the Father. But later they would see.

*I will not leave you orphaned; I am coming to you. In a little while the world will no longer see me, but you will see me; because I live, you also will live. On that day you will know that I am in my Father, and you in me, and I in you. John 14:18-20*

He tells them astounding news that they will assume His mission and will do even greater works than He has done. They will have the same access to the Father as He enjoys. Since He did His works by asking the Father, that is how they will do it. Judas (not Iscariot) could not understand how they would be seeing Him and the world would not be seeing Him. Jesus explained that the Holy Spirit would live in them and would reveal to them how to embrace the life that had been given to them. He uses the metaphor of the vine. The life they were given is much like the life in a vine with branches that produce fruit. In the Old Testament the vine was often a picture of Israel as God's chosen instrument of doing His work on earth (see Isaiah 5:1-7). He had made no mistake in continuously reminding His disciples that He was the new Israel. He was born under the covenant and had lived obedient to every aspect, thus receiving the blessing stipulated in the covenant made through Moses. He is now the blessed vine that owns all the blessings promised to an obedient Israel. That blessed life flows through the branches causing them to produce the fruit of His life. Living in union with the resurrected Jesus gives them everything they need to do what they were born to do. There is no need for striving to gain blessings. Nor is there a need to sweat at doing good deeds hoping to show sincerity. How does one live in union with Jesus? Abide! Though it seems too simple, the only way for fruit to be produced is resting in the obedience of Jesus and responding to the love that captures us. This glorifies God and delights the believer.

*If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask for whatever you wish, and it will be done for you. My Father is glorified by this, that you bear much fruit and become my disciples...I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you, and your joy may be complete. (John 15:7-8, 11)*

It is an amazing thought that we have His joy in us. What joy He has in knowing the heart of the Father and hearing that He is eternally pleased. That kind of joy creates abundant energy to fulfill the purpose of human creation and to push back the darkness of evil with the power of a kind of love that raises the dead.

Whatever concept the disciples had about the Holy Spirit before this discourse, it was surely transformed. The amazing privileges continue to be more amazing. The Holy Spirit who had hovered over the waters of creation, had anointed kings, prophets, and priests, and had raised Jesus from the dead was coming to live in the believers both individually and corporately. They were not only sharing the life of fellowship between the Father and the Son, they were sharing the life of the Divine Trinity. The Spirit, working beneath the rational and emotional, reveals the deep things of both man and God. He makes consciously-real the intimacy and power believers share with God.

It should be expected that such a life will intimidate those who don't and can't see it. When Jesus incarnate demonstrated that life, it was misunderstood and rejected by most. It will be the same as His disciples live it. Their lives will be characterized by both persecution and peace. It was Jesus' consciousness of the Father's constant presence that gave Him strength when all His friends forsook Him. It will be the same with the disciples.

*The hour is coming, indeed it has come, when you will be scattered, each one to his home, and you will leave me alone, Yet I am not alone because the Father is with me. I have said this to you, so that in me you may have peace. In the world you face persecution. But take courage; I have conquered the world! John 16:32-33*

After the discourse, Jesus prays. He recognizes His authority to grant eternal life to those the Father has given Him, and then he defines eternal life:

*And this is eternal life, that they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent. John 17:3*

The disciples received the double blessing of being prayed for by the Son, and the privilege of seeing how Jesus, who shared life with the Father, prayed. Since we know that the Son prays according to the will of the Father, we rejoice that this prayer is answered and that even present day disciples are included:

*I ask not only on behalf of these, but also on behalf of those who will believe in me through their word, that they may all be one. As you, Father are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us, so that the world may believe that you sent me. The glory that you have given me I have given them, so that they may be one, as we are one, I in them and you in me, that they may become completely one, so that the world may know that you have sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me. John 17:20-23*

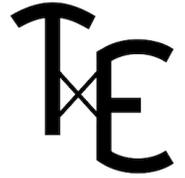
But what kind of oneness is Jesus talking about? It is popular among church leaders to plead for unity that allows various denominations and schools of theology to lessen their convictions on doctrine in order to achieve unity. Trying to find the lowest common denominator theologically or ecclesiastically usually results in a nebulous moral plea for everyone to be nicer and try to get along. Jesus is describing something much different. The unity He offers is actually the real-time sharing in the life of God by His Spirit. It is the joy of sharing unhindered access to the Father, the confidence that the job we do is as assured of success as the finished work of Jesus on the cross. It is a unity that allows a divine-human intimacy that satisfies the thirst of the human soul and the demands of divine glory.

Historically, there have been a segment of people cautious of the subjective dynamic of the Christian experience. Skeptical of the Charismatic expressions of some, they have inadvertently reduced the faith-life to belief in propositions, confidence in principles, and reliance on ritual. They might exhort us to believe that positionally or theoretically we are one with Christ or that He sees us as united with Him, but there is no actual union of persons. But, if we take seriously the accounts of the early church in the book of Acts, we conclude that the life that is demonstrated there does not come from people living their own lives while trying to believe that God will help them from a distance.

The echoes from the Upper Room give ground to the New Testament authors to expound further the glories of a salvation that involves an actual new life. They all insist that salvation from Jesus is more than legal, positional, rational, or emotional. It is the fellowship of being one with the person who is life. They encounter the various circumstances of life from the perspective that they are vitally connected to the One who will answer their prayers and release His own resources to flow through them to produce the fruit of a brand of love the world never suspected until it was revealed in the shared life of the Son and the Father.



# Theological Roundtable 2025



**Sam Storms**  
Enjoying God Ministries, Oklahoma City, Oklahoma

## The Theological Meaning and Practical Implications of Union with Christ

(as found in Ephesians 1:1-14)

Wayne Grudem correctly declares that “*every aspect* of God’s relationship to believers is in some way connected to our relationship with Christ” (*Systematic Theology*, 1031). Although this may sound like an overstatement, an exaggeration that exceeds reality, the testimony of Scripture affirms it. From our election in eternity past (Eph. 1:4, 11-12; 2 Tim. 1:9) to our glorification in eternity future, there is no experience of the Christian or blessing we receive that is not in some way tied to our union with Jesus.

To put it bluntly, the saving work of Jesus Christ is of no benefit to us unless and until we are in union with him through the powerful work of the Holy Spirit. If this is true (and it is), why has there been so little said of our union with Christ, at least in comparison with our focus on other themes such as atonement, justification, regeneration, redemption, glorification, etc.? Given the number of times our union with Christ is mentioned in the NT, one would think it would be more of a central theme in our preaching and daily walk with the Savior. The phrase, *en Christō*, “in Christ”, occurs 83 times in the writings of Paul alone. The broader terminology of “union with Christ” (such as “in him,” “in whom,” etc.) occurs more than 200 times, again, in the writings of Paul alone.

Why, then, is our union with Christ not the central focus that it should be? Among the many reasons we could cite, perhaps the most influential is that evangelical Protestants are more at home in conceiving of salvation in purely legal or forensic terms. The latter is certainly important: justification by faith being the prime example. But even justification is inconceivable apart from our union with Jesus. Packer explains:

“God declares [believers] to be righteous, because he reckons them to be righteous; and he reckons righteousness to them, not because he accounts them to have kept the law personally (which would be a false judgment), but because he accounts them to be united to the one who kept it representatively (and that is a true judgment). For Paul union with Christ is not fancy but fact – the basic fact, indeed, in Christianity; and the doctrine of imputed righteousness is simply

Paul's exposition of the forensic aspect of it" ("Justification," in *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, ed. Walter A. Elwell [Baker], 596).

Related to this is the evangelical aversion to what is experiential, mystical, and subjective. Marcus Johnson explains:

"[T]he relative absence of a robust understanding of our participation in Christ may be explained by a particularly modern reticence to embrace mystery at the heart of our faith confession. This hesitation is evidence of Protestant theology's dangerous liaison with rationalism. To many evangelical ears, 'union with Christ' terminology and imagery sound 'mystical,' and we prefer to cede mystical concepts and categories to Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox theologies. . . . [M]odern evangelicals often seem more prepared to embrace doctrines apparently amenable to logical, rational systematization than to embrace the mysteries of our faith in a state of wonder and confession" (*One with Christ: An Evangelical Theology of Salvation*, 27).

As we shall see, "God has joined himself to us through Jesus Christ in order to save us" (Marcus Johnson, *Ibid.*, 37). This means that there never was a time when God did not regard us as united with his Son, nor will there ever be a time when that union ends. This leads to the stunning conclusion that whatever Jesus did for us as our representative, the Father counted it as something we ourselves have done. This is why Paul could declare that the guilt of our sins was reckoned to be his (2 Cor. 5:21). Thus, when Jesus Christ died, we died in him. We were "crucified with him" (Rom. 6:6; Gal. 2:20; 2 Cor. 5:14). It stands to reason, then, that having died with/in him we were also buried with him (Col. 2:12) in baptism and raised up "with him" and "seated . . . with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus" (Eph. 2:6). It is nothing short of staggering that what Jesus experienced in saving us can be attributed no less to us because of the union between us and him that was decreed by the Father and brought into reality by the Spirit when he awakened faith in our hearts.

But it doesn't stop with the initial moment of faith and conversion. Because of our union with Christ in his life, death, resurrection, and exaltation, we can respond to the temptations of the world, the flesh, and the devil, as if "dead" (Rom. 7:6). We are truly "alive" to God and empowered to live a new and utterly marvelous life (Rom. 6:11). Paul sums it up well when he declares that we have become a "new creation" *in Christ* (2 Cor. 5:17).

Not only eternal life, but life in the present moment is possible only because we are "in" Christ Jesus (1 John 5:11; 2 Tim. 1:1). All that we need to live lives that honor and glorify God is "in Christ." This includes faith and love (1 Tim. 1:14; 2 Tim. 1:13), grace (2 Tim. 2:1), salvation (2 Tim. 2:10), and "all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge" (Col. 2:3). Paul sums it up well when he says that we "are in Christ Jesus, who became for us wisdom from God, righteousness and sanctification and redemption" (1 Cor. 1:30).

Indeed, God has “blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places” (Eph. 1:3). To be cut off from Christ is to be severed from any and all such blessings. The testimony of Scripture is clear that there is only one avenue, one means, one way in which a person can lay hold of the multitude of blessings that God in grace has chosen to give: it is by union with Jesus!

In many texts, the language of “in Christ” points more directly to the idea of source. We find all we need for life here and in the hereafter in who Christ is and what he does. But knowing what is the source of all such blessings is of no benefit to us unless we ourselves are united to/with Christ. Such blessings become ours because Christ is ours and we are his.

Grudem goes so far as to say that “every stage of the application of redemption is given to us because we are ‘in Christ’” (1034). We are “called” in Christ (1 Cor. 7:22), born again or regenerated (what Paul refers to as being “created in Christ Jesus,” Eph. 2:10), “justified” (Phil. 3:9), set free from the condemnation that we otherwise would deserve (“there is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus” (Rom. 8:1), and ultimately “glorified with him” (Rom. 8:17) on the final day. This means that to be outside of Christ or not in union with him exposes an individual to every curse and punishment of the law. If every positive and glorious blessing is found only in Christ, every negative and grievous tragedy is for those outside of Christ. Paul summed it up well when he said, “Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come” (2 Cor. 5:17). Simply put, “union with Christ is an inclusive term for the whole of salvation; the various other doctrines are simply subparts” (Millard Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 3:948).

Says Grudem, “every action in our lives can be done ‘in Christ,’ if it is done in the power of his kingdom and in a way that brings honor to him” (1035). For example,

- Paul speaks the truth “in Christ” (Rom. 9:1)
- Reminds his readers of his ways “in Christ” (1 Cor. 4:17)
- Hopes “in the Lord Jesus” (Phil. 2:19)
- Rejoices “in the Lord” (Phil. 4:10)
- Reminds children to obey their parents “in the Lord” (Eph. 6:1)
- Tells wives to submit to their husbands “in the Lord” (Col. 3:18)
- Exhorts us all to be “strong in the Lord” (Eph. 6:10)
- Exhorts us to be “encouraged in the Lord” (Phil. 2:1)
- To agree with one another “in the Lord” (Phil. 4:2)
- To stand firm “in the Lord” (Phil. 4:1)
- To live a godly life “in the Lord” (2 Tim. 3:12)
- To “work hard” (Rom. 16:12), be “confident” (Phil. 1:14) and stand “approved” (Rom. 16:10).

*Not Only Are We in Christ: Christ is in US!*

Paul says it clearly:

“But *if Christ is in you*, although the body is dead because sin, the Spirit is life because of righteousness” (Rom. 8:10).

“To them God chose to make known how great among the Gentiles are the riches of the glory of this mystery, which is *Christ in you*, the hope of glory” (Col. 1:27).

“I have been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live, but *Christ who lives in me*” (Gal. 2:20a).

This raises the question of whether this mutual indwelling is only metaphorical or in some sense literal or spatial. It would appear that the sense in which we are “in” Christ is not the same as Christ being present “in” us. We are “in” Christ according to the will, purpose, and intent of the Father. He reckons or considers us as inseparable from his Son (we are *identified with and incorporated in Christ*). Our “union” or oneness with Christ, therefore, at least in terms of *our* experience, is not spatial. It is spiritual. By that I mean that, as far as the Father is concerned, whatever may be found in Christ or whatever he may have achieved for sinners like you and me, is ours.

But neither I nor any of you are spatially present “in” Jesus. Our union with him is an expression of the promise God has made to all who believe. We are all present on earth while he is present at the right hand of the Father. But he, on the other hand, is both spatially and spiritually “in” us. Wherever we go, whatever we do, we can know with certainty that the risen Christ abides within us. I do not mean that his resurrected and glorified body is “in” each of our bodies. But he is most assuredly spiritually present, much as he would be in the elements of the Eucharist (as the Reformed conceive it, as over against both the Zwinglian or symbolic understanding of the Eucharist and the Roman Catholic view).

Consider Paul’s prayer in Ephesians 3:14-21. He asks that we would be strengthened with power through the Holy Spirit “so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith” (v. 17). His “dwelling” in us is quite real, perhaps even tangible. That is, there is every reason to believe that we have the capacity, through the Spirit, to “feel” and “sense” the indwelling Christ in our hearts. Even if we don’t, we may rest assured that the spiritually omnipresent Son of God abides within us. It is more than simply that *truths* about Christ live within us, or that he exerts a powerful *influence* within and through us. *He himself lives within us!* While his glorified body is in heaven, and will remain there until he returns at the end of the age, his “being” as God cannot be restricted or confined within that body.

This is similar to what came to be known as the *Extra Calvinisticum*. During the time of the Protestant Reformation the Lutherans had contended that the whole Logos was

present in Jesus, thus demanding the communication of the divine attribute of omnipresence to the humanity (and hence the latter's ubiquity). They needed to affirm this to justify their belief that the physical body of the risen Christ was present in/around/under/with the elements of the Eucharist. Calvin and the reformed tradition held to a much stronger distinction between the infinite and finite (*finitum non est capax infiniti*) and thus concluded that the Logos, truly present in Jesus' manhood, is nonetheless existent outside it (*totus extra carnem* as well as *totus in carne*), governing the world simultaneously from a different center of life and consciousness, so to speak, from that at which he dwelt incarnate in Jesus. Said Calvin: "Although the boundless essence of the Word was united with human nature into one person, we have no idea of any enclosing. The Son of God descended miraculously from heaven, yet without abandoning heaven; was pleased to be conceived miraculously in the Virgin's womb, to live on the earth, and hang upon the cross, and yet always filled the world as from the beginning" (*Institutes*, II, 13ff.).

Does this union mean that I am everywhere Christ is? Yes, but only spiritually, in accord with the mind and will of God. On the other hand, it is true that Christ is everywhere I am. That is to say, *Christ Jesus is truly in us both spiritually and spatially* wherever we may be and whatever we may be doing.

*What Union with Christ does NOT mean*

- Our union with Christ does not mean that we are invulnerable to the attack of Satan.
- It does not mean that unbelievers cannot persecute and even kill us.
- Union with Christ does not guarantee a life free from confusion, frustration, and pain.
- Union with Christ does not mean we are guaranteed health and wealth.
- Union with Christ does not lead to sinless perfection in this life.

However, because of our union with Christ we can rest assured that no attack of the enemy, no physical disease or spiritual failure, no sin that we commit, nor anything else in the wide range of human experience can separate us from the Lord in whom we live, and breathe, and have our being.

In addition:

- It is not a merging of the Son of God with the children of God, such that before the union there were two and after there is only one.
- It is not the absorption of the children of God into the Son of God.
- It is not the loss of our individuality or distinctive identity as children of God.
- It is not the loss of Christ's distinctive identity as the Lord and Savior of believers.

- Although we are “one” with Christ, we are still distinct created entities. In other words, there is no mixture of natures (ours with his).
- Union with Christ is not deification, as if we in some sense cease to be human and become God. We remain finite creatures, and he remains infinite creator.
- Although we become “like” Christ, we are not “Christ.”
- Union with Christ does not necessarily entail a subjective, emotional reaction or feeling, though it may.
- Union with Christ is mystical in nature, but not so as to blur the distinction between Creator and creature.
- Union with Christ is not primarily “moral” in nature, as if it consists solely, or even primarily, in a transformation of our behavior to be “like” Christ.
- Union with Christ does not entail a transformation in the character and personality of Christ, but does mean that we experience a progressive change from one stage of glory to another.
- Although the moral and spiritual qualities of Christ are infused into us by virtue of our union with him, our moral failures and faults are not infused into him. However, the latter are “imputed” or “reckoned” to him on the cross.

Richard Gaffin summarizes well:

“This union is so central, so pivotal, that without it the saving work of Christ, the once-for-all redemption he has accomplished, ‘remains useless and of no value.’ Union is the all-or-nothing reality on which everything depends in the application of salvation. I must have Christ or I have nothing – that underlies and gives rise to everything else. Without union, the benefits that flow from it are otherwise nonexistent or irrelevant.

This union, further, is not partial union, as if one can share in some benefits without others. Unless I share in all of his benefits, I share in none of them. If I do not have the whole Christ, I have no Christ. Or, as Calvin puts it memorably elsewhere, Christ ‘cannot be divided into pieces.’” (“The Work of Christ Applied,” in *Christian Dogmatics*, edited by Michael Allen and Scott R. Swain, [Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2016], 284-85).

*The Believer’s Union with Christ*  
*According to Paul’s Epistle to the Ephesians 1:3-14*

Such is the broad swath of spiritual truths that are ours in Christ Jesus. So now, we turn our attention to unpack in greater detail the testimony of Paul in Ephesians concerning our union with Christ.

**1. Christians are simultaneously both “in” a particular city and “in” Christ Jesus. “To the saints who are in Ephesus, and are faithful in Christ Jesus” (Eph. 1:1)**

“To speak of Paul’s sense of ‘geography’ is an attempt to describe the ‘place’ where he thought Christians live. In Paul’s mind, just as these Christians live literally in the region near Ephesus, they also live in Christ. The terrain, climate, values, and history in which people grow up and live help to define who they are. As really as this region near Ephesus defines who they are, Christ defines who believers really are. He is the ‘sphere of influence’ or ‘power field’ in which they live and from which they benefit and are transformed. That is, his Spirit, values, character, history, and purposes shape their lives. People can live in other spheres (cf. 2:1-3), but Christians live in Christ. Jesus Christ must never be depersonalized by such language, but we will not understand Paul unless we learn to think of life as lived *in Christ*” (Klyne Snodgrass, *Ephesians*, NIV Application Commentary, 40).

Thus, there are two levels of experience for the believer, two kingdoms of which he/she is a citizen, two perspectives from which we may view life. For us today, we are in/at Tesoro Ranch. In a real sense, that is *where* we are. But it cannot and must not ever exhaust *what* we are. We are more than citizens of an earthly city or state or country. Bishop Handley Moule wrote the following of the same statement in Colossians 1. I have taken the liberty of replacing “Colossae” with “Ephesus”:

“They moved about Ephesus ‘in Christ.’ They worked, served, kept the house, followed the business, met the neighbors, entered into their sorrows and joys, . . . suffered their abuse and insults when such things came – all ‘in Christ.’ They carried about with them a private atmosphere, which was not of Asia but of heaven. To them Christ was the inner home, the dear invisible but real resting place. . . And what a rich gain for poor Ephesus, that they, being in Him, were in it” (28).

This concept of being “in” Christ Jesus has immense practical implications. No matter where you are geographically and physically, what you are spiritually will never change. You may be *at work, at play, overseas, under the weather, out of money*, but you are always and unchangeably *in Christ*! You may be *down in the dumps, over the hill, or beside yourself*, but you are always and unchangeably *in Christ*! You may be *at paradise or in prison, at the movies or in Texas*, but you are always and unchangeably *in Christ*! Your geographical, earthly, physical location has no effect on your spiritual identity.

But the reverse is different. It is precisely because you are *in Christ* that wherever you live and work and play, you make an impact, you carry an influence, you make a difference. Your spiritual identity as one in Christ must control and characterize how you live, *wherever* you live. And remember: it is *in Texas* that you are *in Christ*. They are true simultaneously. You do not live in Christ only while you are at church or in class or in a home group, then to return to being simply in Dallas or OKC, when you leave that more “holy” atmosphere. Your “in-Christ-ness” is not simply a heavenly reality that obtains only somewhere up there. You are “in Christ” even when you are “in sin”!

## 2. We are recipients of every spiritual blessing only if we are “in Christ” (Eph. 1:3).

Numerous suggestions have been made about the meaning of being “in” Christ in this text.

- Some say it is a concept carried over from the mystery religions of Paul’s day and refers to sacramental initiation and absorption into divinity, resulting in some sort of mystic identity, ecstatic experience; etc.
- Many contend for what can only be called a literal or local sense: the risen Christ is something of an ethereal, omnipresent spirit; as air is in us and we in it, so Christ is “in” us and we “in” him, in a somewhat quasi-physical sense (cf. Acts 17:28 – “in him we live, and move, and have our being”).
- Often this phrase has an *instrumental* sense and might be translated “through” Christ or “by means of” Christ, or even “because of” Christ.
- It may be that “in Christ” is simply a metaphor of personal communion with Christ via the indwelling Holy Spirit; an undefinable, mystical oneness or spiritual fellowship with the Lord.
- On occasion the phrase is used adjectivally and is simply synonymous with the word “believer” or “Christian” (see 2 Cor. 12:2).
- In some texts the phrase qualifies or limits an action, as in Eph. 6:1 where children are commanded to obey their parents “in the Lord”.
- Many argue for a *corporate or covenant* identification with Christ. What is true of him is true of us. As we were once “in Adam” in that he represented us, and what he did, we were reckoned to have done, so now we are “in Christ”. He represents us. What was said of Christ can now be said of believers.
- Snodgrass combines several of the ideas in the above list and says that “Christ is the ‘place’ where believers reside, the source in which they find God’s salvation and blessings, and the framework in which they live and work. . . . [However], just as Christ’s personhood is not lost, neither is the believer’s individuality lost. This is not some eastern religious thought of absorption into the deity. Rather, Christ and the believer are bound into a unity in which Christ sets the parameters for life and makes available God’s provisions for life” (47-8).

## 3. We are “elect” “in Christ” / “God chose us in him” (Eph. 1:4).

Arminians insist that an individual is chosen for salvation because and only after he puts himself in Christ by an act of free will. God foreknows that we will fulfill the condition, as a result of which we are put “in Christ,” and on that basis he elects us.

Other Arminians insist that it is not so much individuals who are elect, but Christ himself, or perhaps the Church. Thus, they insist that it is only because we are in Christ (by free will, of course), who is himself the one true elect person, that we as individuals may be said to be elect ourselves.

It must be admitted that the clause “in Christ” is ambiguous. By itself, it says neither that we are elect because we are in Christ nor that we are elect in order that we shall be in Christ. What are the options according to Calvinist interpreters?

- Contrary to what some Calvinists would say, it is unlikely that Paul means we were chosen “to be” in Christ, insofar as the latter part of the verse declares that we were chosen “to be” holy and blameless.
- Even less can it mean that we were chosen because we, before our election, put ourselves in Christ by free will. This is reading into the passage what is conspicuous by its absence. Besides, the ground of our election is said to be God’s good pleasure, not ours.
- Others suggest Paul means that Christ is the *foundation* of election, or perhaps the *sphere* of election. But what do those terms mean? What is their theological significance?
- Maybe Paul means that it is “in union with Christ” that we are chosen. I have no problem with that, but the question remains, how did we come to be “in union” with Christ: by free will or by free grace or by some other avenue? Did our union with Christ precede or follow our election? Was it the cause or the consequence of election? Or is our union with Christ simultaneous with our election, perhaps even synonymous with it? In other words, simply saying that God chose us “in union with Christ” does not tell us *how* or *when* that “union” came about, or whether it has anything to do with the *basis* for our being chosen.
- Perhaps “in Christ” simply means “through Christ,” or, to say it negatively, “not apart from Christ.” Charles Hodge opts for this view and explains it this way:

“It was in Christ as their head and representative [that] they were chosen to holiness and eternal life, and therefore in virtue of what he was to do in their behalf. There is a federal union with Christ which is antecedent to all actual union, and is the source of it. God gave a people to his Son in the covenant of redemption. Those included in that covenant, and because they are included in it – in other words, because they are in Christ as their head and representative – receive in time the gift of the Holy Spirit and all other benefits of redemption. . . It is, therefore, in Christ, i.e., as united to him in the covenant of redemption, that the people of God are elected to eternal life and to all the blessings therewith connected” (*Commentary on Ephesians*, 31).

In summary, when God elected a people from the fallen mass of humanity, he never intended to save them apart from his Son but only by means of what his Son, the Lord Jesus, would accomplish in his redemptive work. Jesus is therefore the means by which God's electing purpose is put into effect as well as the goal of that election, inasmuch as it is God's purpose through election to sum up all things in Christ (Eph. 1:10).

Paul says much the same thing in 2 Timothy 1:9. There we are told that God saved us and "called us with a holy calling, not according to our works, but according to his own purpose and grace which was granted us *in Christ Jesus* from all eternity." Again, we read much the same in 1 Corinthians 1:4-5 - "I give thanks to my God always for you because of the grace of God that was given you *in Christ Jesus*, that in every way you were enriched *in him* in all speech and knowledge." If we are given anything in grace it is by virtue of who Jesus is and what he has done and will do, not by virtue of who we are or what we have done or will do. Therefore, we are elect "in Christ," not "in ourselves." It is because of God's love for his Son and his desire that his Son have a people through whom he might be glorified and honored that God chose us. Therefore, we are chosen "in Christ" in the sense that this Son to whom the Father has given us is he through whom this election to life is made ours in experience. His sinless life, atoning death, and glorious resurrection were the means through which God's electing purpose was put into effect.

**4. We have been blessed with God's "glorious grace . . . in the Beloved" (i.e., in Christ) (Eph. 1:6b).**

**5. "Redemption" from sin is found only "in him [Christ]" (Eph. 1:7).**

**6. God's purpose is to "unite all things in him" (Eph. 1:9-10).**

As Best says, "believers, foreordained and already possessing their deliverance, are now told about the secret of the ultimate destiny of the cosmos" (133). The mystery "which has been disclosed to believers in accordance with God's purpose for history is his summing up of all things in Christ" (Lincoln, 32). The verb translated "summing up" or "unite" (ESV; *anakephalaiōsasthai*) means either "to renew, arrange under one head, reduce to one sum," or "to reunify," re-establish harmony where discord and chaos and division once existed (cf. Col. 1:19-20). The idea is that the discordant and disintegrating elements in the creative realm will be renewed and unified under the Lordship of Jesus. Everything will be brought into submission to his will and subservience to his glory.

Note the word "plan" (v. 10a; *oikonomia*). This refers either to (1) the act of administering; or (2) that which is administered, an arrangement or plan; or (2) special duty or assigned task within a household; i.e., a person's stewardship. (1) is probably most accurate. That which is being administered by God is the fullness of the times. God will, in fact, orchestrate and administer the events and direction and course of

history to bring about his ultimate purpose, but only “in Christ”. What he wants to happen will happen when it is the right time for it to happen, culminating in the achievement of God’s purpose. As F. F. Bruce put it, when the time is ripe for “the consummation of his purpose, in his providential overruling of the course of the world, that consummation will be realized” (262).

The “all things” which require summing up “in him” include:

- the inanimate creation (Rom. 8:18-23; 2 Peter 3:13); consider the hostility between the animal world and humanity; also the terrors of natural phenomena such as tornadoes, earthquakes, floods, etc.
- the elect (soteriological reconciliation)
- the unfallen angelic host (their ministry to us brings them into contact with the sin and evil of this world)
- the fallen demonic host and the unsaved, non-elect (Eph. 6:12; see esp. 1 Cor. 15:24-25).

So-called “reconciliation” or “reunification” or “uniting” of the fallen, unsaved world of sentient beings entails their non-salvific subjugation and conquest. Christ’s work was to create peace and harmony, to restore what was lost and corrupted by Adam. He does so in one of two ways: (1) by removal of hostility and corruption through redemptive and forgiving grace; and (2) by pacification through power (i.e., conquest).

Herman Bavinck:

“Round about us we observe so many facts which seem to be unreasonable, so much undeserved suffering [such as child abuse], so many unaccountable calamities, such an uneven and inexplicable distribution of destiny, and such an enormous contrast between the extremes of joy and sorrow, that anyone reflecting on these things is forced to choose between viewing this universe as if it were governed by the blind will of an unbenign deity, as is done by pessimism, or, upon the basis of Scripture and by faith, to rest in the absolute and sovereign, yet – however incomprehensible – wise and holy will of him who will one day cause the full light of heaven to dawn upon these mysteries of life” (quoted by Hendriksen, 87).

### ***7. We have obtained “an inheritance” only “in him” [i.e., Christ] (Eph. 1:11).***

Again there are several interpretive possibilities: (1) it may be translated “we have obtained an inheritance” (see Col. 1:12; Eph. 1:14a); (2) it may be translated as a simple passive: “we were chosen or appointed by lot”; or (3) it may mean, “we were made to be an inheritance”, namely, God’s inheritance. For the latter idea, quite common in the OT (where Israel is described as God’s “lot” or “chosen portion”), see Ps. 33:12; Deut.

9:29; 32:8-9. In favor of (1) is the reference to “adoption” in v. 5. As God’s adopted children, we stand to inherit everything that is his!

**8. It is only by virtue of our being “in him” [i.e., in Christ] that we were sealed with the promised Holy Spirit” (Eph. 1:13).**

Spiritual sealing:

- Its *meaning* – (1) to authenticate (John 3:33; 6:27; 1 Cor. 9:2) or confirm as genuine and true, including the idea that what is sealed is stamped with the character of its owner; (2) to designate or mark out as one’s property; to declare and signify ownership (see Rev. 7:3-8; 9:4); (3) to render secure or to establish (i.e., protect; cf. Eph. 4:30; Matt. 27:66; Rev. 20:3)
- Its *instrument* – With what are we sealed? The Holy Spirit. It isn’t so much that the Spirit does the sealing as the Spirit *is* the seal. Hence, sealing = the reception and consequent indwelling of the Holy Spirit.
- Its *sphere* – In regard to whom are we sealed? Christ (“in him”)
- Its *time* – When were we sealed? The *Reformed Sealers* (e.g., Richard Sibbes, Thomas Goodwin, John Owen, and in our day, Martyn Lloyd-Jones) sought to identify Spirit-baptism with the “sealing” of the Holy Spirit described in Eph. 1:13. I have no major problem with that, but they believed it to be an *experiential* event *subsequent* to regeneration (and therefore to be sought) that brings a profound, inner, *direct*, assurance of salvation (as over against a *sylogistic* assurance which one *deduces* from the fact that one believes). It also produces power for ministry and witness, joy, and a sense of God’s glorious presence. These men make no connection between baptism in the Spirit and the charismatic gifts. Indeed, aside from Lloyd-Jones, the Reformed Sealers were all cessationists (i.e., they believed that the miraculous gifts of the Spirit *ceased* when the original apostles died; see Martyn Lloyd-Jones’ book *Joy Unspeakable: Power & Renewal in the Holy Spirit* [Wheaton: Harold Shaw Publishers, 1984]).

The dispute, then, is over how we are to understand the relationship between “believing” (lit., “having believed” [an aorist participle]) and “sealing” (lit., “you were sealed” [the main verb]). Should we translate it, “*after* believing (or “since you believed”), you were sealed,” in which case sealing is indeed separate from and subsequent to saving faith (conversion)? Or should we translate it, “*when* you believed, you were sealed,” in which case sealing and believing are simultaneous? Grammatically speaking, one can find evidence for both usages in the NT (although “when you believed” is more probable; see esp. Acts 19:2). Gordon Fee is inclined to think that believing is indeed antecedent to sealing, but, he says, “the two verbs have nothing to do with separate and distinct experiences of faith. Rather, the one ('having believed [in Christ]' logically precedes the other ('you were sealed')); but from Paul's perspective these are two sides of the same coin” (670). So, whereas

there may be a basis for equating the “sealing” of the Spirit with the “baptism” in the Spirit, there is no basis for making the latter a separate and subsequent event that brings an extraordinary anointing or experiential empowering.

The word “pledge” or “earnest” or “guarantee” (ESV) refers to a portion of the total purchase price paid in advance as a promise that the full payment will come in due course. See 2 Cor. 1:22; 5:5. In giving the Holy Spirit to us “God is not simply promising us our final inheritance but actually providing us with a foretaste of it, even if it ‘is only a *small fraction* of the future endowment’” (O’Brien, 121). For our purposes it must be noted once again that this glorious blessing and the assurance of the future consummation of our salvation is true only by virtue of or as a consequence of our being “in him” (v. 13).

### *Conclusion*

Although we have reached the end of the focus of this paper, we should take note of yet additional blessings described in Ephesians that are ours as the fruit of being in union with Jesus Christ:

- We were made alive “together with Christ,” “raised up with him,” and seated “with him” in the heavenlies (Eph. 2:5-6). We see this most clearly by noting how Paul adds the preposition “with” (*sun*) to each of these verbs. He made us alive together with him (*sunedzōpoiēsen*). He raised us up with him (*sunēgeiren*). He seated us together with him (*sunekathisen*). Paul says much the same thing in Colossians 2:12-13 where he says that believers have been buried with him (*suntaphentes*), raised with him (*sunēgerthēte*), and made alive together with him (*sunedzōpoiēsen*).

Listen closely and reflect on what Paul says in Ephesians 2:4-6. Earlier in Ephesians 1:20-23, Paul tells us that God (1) has raised Jesus from the dead, (2) has seated Christ at his right hand and (3) has exalted and elevated him to a place of unchallenged authority. Ok, Sam, but what has that got to do with me? How does this truth about Jesus Christ help me get free of the shame that dominates my life?

Anyone who has done any counseling or ministry to those who have been abused or suffer with depression or live every day shackled by shame will tell you that the most fundamental problem people face is one of *identity*. They don’t know who they are in Christ, nor do they know what God has done for them. The remarkable thing about this portion of Ephesians is that *what Paul said in chapter one concerning what God has done for Jesus, he now in chapter two says that he has done the same thing for us!* Stop and ponder this breathtaking reality: if you have trusted in Jesus, God sees you as having been raised from spiritual death, exalted up with Christ and seated in the heavens with Jesus, and invested with authority over all demonic spirits. This is who you are!

We need to stop thinking of ourselves as a loser, as a failure, as a castoff from the rest of the world, as a disqualified reject. Let the Holy Spirit awaken you to this incredible

truth. Let me state it again: *You have been raised, exalted, and seated in the heavens together with Jesus, and given authority over the entire realm of Satan and his demons.* I know that this runs counter to your experience day in and day out. We still live in our mortal bodies and still struggle with the sinful impulses of the flesh. People slander you. They use you. They exploit you. They sin against you. They abuse you. And the only way we can survive and live above the damage they inflict is by constantly reminding ourselves and reflecting on the reality of what God has done for us in Christ Jesus.

We especially need to see what this means for our battle against Satan and all demonic hosts. When God seated Christ at his right hand, Paul says that this placed him “far above all rule and authority and power and dominion, and above every name that is named, . . . and he put all things under his feet” (Eph. 1:21-22). Do you see what is being said here? *Because you are one with Christ, united with him by faith,* God has also raised, exalted, and seated you above all demonic powers. Folks, I’m not making this up. They are just as much beneath your feet and subject to your authority as they are to the authority of Jesus. Listen to what Paul says about you: God, “being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which he loved us, even when we were dead in our trespasses, made **us** alive together with Christ . . . and raised **us** up with him and seated **us** with him in the heavenly places” (Eph. 2:4-5).

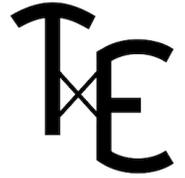
So, don’t ever think that in your war with shame and self-contempt and hopelessness and depression that you are at the mercy of Satan and his demons. No! They are under your feet, just as surely as they are under the feet of Jesus and subject to his authority.

- God intends to put on display in the coming ages the riches of his grace in kindness toward us “*in Christ Jesus*” (Eph. 2:7).
- We were “created *in Christ Jesus* for good works” (Eph. 2:10).
- It is a result of our being “*in Christ Jesus*” (Eph. 2:13) that we have been brought near to God.
- It is a result of our being “*in*” Christ that we are growing into a holy temple “*in the Lord*” (Eph. 2:21).
- It is the fruit of our being “*in him*” (Eph. 2:22) that we are being “built together into a dwelling place for God by the Spirit.”
- It is “*in*” Christ Jesus that we have boldness and access to God (Eph. 3:12).
- We were “taught *in him*” [i.e., in Christ] to put off the old self (Eph. 4:21).
- It is “*in the Lord*” that we find “strength” to overcome the enemy (Eph. 6:10).

Praise be to Christ Jesus “*in whom*” we have all the blessings of eternal life!



# Theological Roundtable 2025



**Tom Hall**  
Shared Life Services, Bedford, Texas

## MADE SONS THROUGH THE SON: ADOPTION AND UNION WITH CHRIST

*“Adoption is the highest privilege that the gospel offers: higher even than justification... To be right with God the Judge is a great thing, but to be loved and cared for by God the Father is greater.” J.I. Packer*

The assigned and recommended reading in preparation for this event has challenged us to think about justification, sanctification, and other aspects of salvation as related to a larger, more inclusive doctrine of union with Christ. Adoption is one of the doctrinal themes reframed in this way, yet room remains for a closer association with Christ as the Son to be considered. Here we will explore the idea that mutual union with Christ, including indwelling by his Spirit, gives believers a fuller context for understanding and enjoying their adoption as sons, with its status, benefits, and responsibilities.

### PAUL’S USE OF “ADOPTION”

An obvious starting place is Paul’s use of “adoption” in his letters. He employs the Greek word five times. *huiiothesia*, which literally means “son-making” (though some have claimed it’s a reference to “sonship”, the status rather than the process). In four cases, Paul speaks of adoption as sons with reference to believers in Christ. In the remaining instance, he lists it as belonging to natural Israel among the blessings of her covenant with God.

To begin with the clearest connection between union with Christ and adoption as sons, Paul says in Ephesians, “[God] predestined us to be adopted as sons through Jesus Christ for himself, according to the good pleasure of his will. . .” (1:5, this and following quotations are from CSB). In the context of extolling God for the blessings of those who are in Christ by faith, Paul includes that believers are adopted as sons “through Jesus Christ for himself [the Father]” This is the stated object of his predestining, to make sons through Jesus Christ of those who believe in him. The larger passage is about the blessings of union with Christ, and one of the aspects of “spiritual blessings” (v. 3) included in that union is this adoption as sons. God the Father is said to consider himself somehow the beneficiary of this, the sonship is “for himself”. And finally, this was done “according to the good pleasure of his will.” It aligns with please him and accomplish his purpose.

The earliest occasion of this term in Paul’s letters comes in Galatians 4:3-7: In the same way we also, when we were children, were in slavery under the elements of the world. When the time

came to completion, *God sent his Son*, born of a woman, born under the law, to redeem those under the law, so that we might receive adoption as sons. And because you are sons, God sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying, "Abba, Father!" So you are no longer a slave *but a son*, and if a son, then God has made you an heir.

Here Paul explains to the Galatians that they are included in the redemption from slavery accomplished by God's Son (Messiah) when he redeemed them to "receive adoption as sons." On the basis of this new status they have received "the Spirit of his Son" in their hearts, crying (in the words of Jesus himself), "Abba, Father!" As slaves become sons, they now have an inheritance in and with Christ the Son.

Later Paul takes up the same topic in Romans: "For you did not receive a spirit of slavery to fall back into fear. Instead, you received *the Spirit of adoption*, by whom we cry out, "Abba, Father!" (8:15). Here he revises slightly his words in Galatians, telling the Roman believers, "you received the Spirit of adoption" (cf. "spirit of his Son," Gal. 4:6). The Spirit brings the experience of sonship to those who once had a "spirit of slavery" and its attendant fear but now find security in trusting Christ for redemption and liberation.

In his final use of the term, Paul takes a different turn by casting adoption into the future. "Not only that, but we ourselves who have the Spirit as the firstfruits—we also groan within ourselves, eagerly waiting for adoption, *the redemption of our bodies*" (8:23). Again, he features the role of the Spirit, whom believers have as "the firstfruits" of a coming harvest. And they groan in the current futility and pain of fallen creation (vv. 20-22) as they wait for the "redemption of [their] bodies" which Paul calls "adoption." Thus adoption is joined to the future hope of sharing in Christ's glory (inheritance) through a further embodied redemption (from previous embodied slavery) Perhaps the idea includes the Father's public claiming his adopted sons when Christ's glory is finally and fully revealed.

In the four pertinent references Paul links adoption as sons with the work Christ has done to redeem and liberate those who were once slaves. It is "through Christ" (Eph. 1:5) that slaves are claimed as sons in the case of those who believe in him. He is their redeemer, their liberator (Gal. 4:5, 7). And God has himself predestined those in Christ to be adopted "for himself," both for his own enjoyment and for the sake of reproducing the joy he has in his eternal Son with those who have been adopted through him.

Likewise, Paul associates the Spirit with this adoption. He is the "spirit of his Son" (Gal. 4:6), and the "spirit of adoption" (Rom. 8:15) and the "Spirit of Christ" (Rom. 8:9) who indwells believers for Christ. He allows liberated slaves to claim sonship with God and to call him, "Abba, Father!" (Gal. 4:6, Rom. 8:15), as the Son himself did in the humility of his incarnation. Since union with Christ properly includes the dwelling of the Spirit with (corporately) and within (individually) those who trust Christ, that union includes this adoptive, filial ministry of the Spirit. As sons, believers are also heirs with Christ (Gal. 4:7; Rom. 8:17) of all the Father has promised him (Ps. 2:8; Gal. 3:29).

Added to the references to adoption already examined could be all Paul's references to believers being "children" and their being "brothers" (and sisters), since both of these are true only by virtue of adoption through Christ. The liberation of sons from slavery and the inheritance of sons in shared glory with Christ lie behind the gospel promises, the relationships, and the

ethical obligations of God's children. The Spirit's activity in affirming their sonship and anticipating their inheritance enables every believer's new life in Christ. It likewise enables a new kind of human community of those adopted and related through Christ. Whenever this filial or fraternal language appears, the theme of adoption as sons funds whatever is stated, exhorted, or enjoined.

## POSSIBLE BACKGROUND FOR THE METAPHOR OF ADOPTION

Much has been studied and said about which customs and laws concerning adoption Paul might have had in mind when he used the metaphor of adoption. The Romans adopted capable adults, usually to make them heirs, and this involved a socially disruptive change of status from one *paterfamilias* to another. To be adopted under Roman law was indeed to enter a whole new world socially and economically. An adoption in this case would almost certainly raise the status and honor of the adopted person. It would bring him (only sons inherited in this world) into a higher level of favor-granting (patronage) rather than favor-seeking (*clientele*).

There is little to go on in discerning the then-current attitude and practice of Jews in adoption. But what can be helpfully certain is that Paul had in mind, perhaps most prominently, the Israelite story of God's claiming his people as his son and his subsequent paternal claim on David's heir to Israel's throne.

The only place Paul uses the noun "adoption" that does not refer to believers in Christ, he speaks of his "own flesh and blood", "They are Israelites, and to them belong *the adoption*, the glory, the covenants, the giving of the law, the temple service, and the promises" (Rom. 9:4). Among other specific benefits of their unique covenant with God, Paul leads with "the adoption." The article indicates he's speaking of a known and particular adoption for Israel, presumably the adoption now available to Gentiles "in Christ" through faith.

### Israel as God's son

When Paul speaks of "the adoption" that belongs to Israelites he hints at how he regards the adoption of all believers through Christ. From the beginning of the redemptive history of the Hebrews in the exodus from Egypt, God claimed Abraham's descendants as his son, even his "firstborn son".

*And you [Moses] will say to Pharaoh: This is what the Lord says: Israel is my firstborn son. I told you: Let my son go so that he may worship me, but you refused to let him go. Look, I am about to kill your firstborn son!" (Ex. 4: 22-23)*

This profession of paternal concern lies behind all that God did to lead, instruct, and provide for the Hebrews in the wilderness and into Canaan. Later, through his prophets, God restates his claim on his persistently rebellious people. Through Hosea He retells the story of their rescue from Egypt and his subsequent care for them in spite of their yearning for Egypt (11:1 ff.). "When Israel was a child, I loved him, and out of Egypt *I called my son* (v. 1)" As with any Jew of his day, Paul recognized the status of God's people as "sons" by divine election and redemption. The status of sonship belonged first to the Jewish nation.

## Israel's king

Over time God's covenant people focused their hope and devotion on a ruler who would represent God and shepherd them well. This hope is expressed in many places in Scripture, significantly in Psalm 2: "' I have installed my king on Zion, my holy mountain.' I will declare the Lord's decree. He said to me, 'You are my Son; today I have become your Father'" (vv. 6-7).

Here God claimed his anointed king (messiah/christ) as a son and promised him the nations as his inheritance (v. 9). The corporate role of sonship in Israel was then focused on one person, the Davidic heir to the throne of God's people. In this way, "son" had become something of a royal title for Israel's (later Judah's) king. God's son and David's son, in this sense, refer to the same person, and prepare the way for a greater fulfillment. Psalm 2 is quoted often by the first generation of believers in Jesus as Christ with reference to his resurrection and reign (e.g., Acts 13:33; Heb. 1:5).

The Old Testament hope for such a king is rooted in the covenant God made with David when he desired to build God a worthy temple ("house"). God instead made him the promise of a dynasty ("house") by means of a descendant who would reign forever.

*...The Lord declares to you [David]: The Lord himself will make a house for you. "When your time comes and you rest with your ancestors, I will raise up after you your descendant, who will come from your body, and I will establish his kingdom. He is the one who will build a house for my name, and I will establish the throne of his kingdom forever. I will be his father, and he will be my son. When he does wrong, I will discipline him with a rod of men and blows from mortals. But my faithful love will never leave him... Your house and kingdom will endure before me forever, and your throne will be established forever" (2 Sam. 7:11-16).*

The crucial idea is in v. 14 where God tells David of his descendant, "I will be his father, and he will be my son." He goes on to describe his paternal role of discipline when the descendant does wrong and of constantly faithful love. This is the sonship of David's ultimate descendant, Christ Jesus, and in intervening years, of David's heirs until Jesus arrived. This is the basis of Messianic hope for Israel. From this time on God will deal with his nation through a royal representative. He will discipline this one through other men when needed, and he will constantly show him covenantal love and faithfulness. He will make David's dynasty eternal by his own faithfulness.

## JESUS AS ISRAELITE AND DAVIDIC SON

As a move toward appreciating adoption as sons through Jesus Christ, it helps to perceive him as the one who became God's son as both Israel's representative and as David's ultimate descendant. The sonship believers experience by the Spirit they possess only and always through Christ, the ultimate and eternal Son.

When the gospels call Jesus God's son, the context can indicate he is "fulfilling all righteousness" (Matt. 3:15) as obedient and faithful Israel. {Matthew 2:15 had earlier used

Hosea's words to identify Jesus as God's son called out of Egypt.) This may be the best way to understand the heavenly voice of affirmation at Jesus' baptism by John (3:17). In being baptized, Jesus volunteered for an exercise in repentance when he had done nothing to violate God's covenant. But he did so as an innocent and righteous representative for his people. God's good pleasure and Spirit rested on Jesus the Son as, at last, a faithful Israelite to keep covenant with God. Jesus was led immediately into the wilderness for 40 days to succeed in every test Israel had failed during her 40 years.

In other contexts the gospels speak (or report others speaking) of Jesus as God's son in a more clearly Messianic sense. Jesus was the royal heir to God's kingdom. Perhaps this is the sense of the heavenly voice three of his disciples heard at Jesus' transfiguration, "This is my beloved son, Hear him (Matt. 17:). This was said with Moses and Elijah present, elevating Jesus' voice and words above those of "the law and prophets' these Jewish men had held dear all their lives. The man they followed was more than another prophet, like Moses and Elijah. His shining appearance and the heavenly voice with its message of Jesus' preeminence indicate a glory for him appropriate for David's final descendant.

## **BELIEVERS AS GOD'S SONS IN CHRIST**

Those united with Christ by faith, Christians, are also beneficiaries and participants in his covenant faithfulness to God. They together, regardless of race or sex or station in society, constitute God's covenant partner on earth and in heaven. To be in union with Christ and to have his Spirit granting the experience of adoption gives such people both the covenantal status of and a dynamic participation with the Son's loving obedience to the Father. They suffer with Christ by the Spirit and thus share in his glory, imperfectly now but completely in the end. They belong to God by his choice, his act, his purpose, and his presence. All this is through the Son who fully and finally kept the covenant Israel never could. He is then the Son who established the new and living way, the covenant that unites sinners to God and grants sanctity to sons.

In the same way, Christians have in the Son their promise of future inheritance and their current status as heirs. The Son has taken his Messianic throne at God's right hand, and he has received his inheritance because he suffered, was raised, ascended, and is glorified. United to him by faith and enlivened with him by his Spirit, believers wait and groan in hope of their own participation in that inheritance, that eternal kingdom. They have his life in them and they await the transformation of their bodies for eternal abiding and co-reigning with the Son, the rightful and generous firstborn Son who shares his double portion with his brethren. They are sons and daughters who by their union with the Son participate in his royal commission. As such they represent him here and now, bearing his name and using his resources for his purposes in the earth.

### **Pastoral Reflection**

The practical concern that gave impetus for this paper came from encountering sincere believers who have heard and embraced the truth that they are by faith now God's own children. Some of them, in conversation, revealed that they understood something of the Spirit's role in making that adopted status meaningful for them, for instance in prayer or in confidence before God. What was lacking in many of these conversations was references to the mediated nature of their sonship "through Christ" and the aspects of his sonship discussed here. Consistent with general

individualization of biblical doctrine among moderns and postmoderns, many have grasped and enjoyed their status as God's children but in ways that bypass the necessary dependence on Jesus as mediator of that blessing. His Spirit is given some regard, but the Son himself less so.

To the degree this is a valid observation, more theological focus on the aspects of Jesus' sonship and better teaching and preaching on these would edify believers who have a conceptual and practical gap in this matter. As adopted children, believers need to comprehend and pursue their sonship with the Father, by the Spirit, but especially through the Son.

### **Theological Reflection**

This perspective on adoption as sons as a benefit of union with Christ suggests further theological-ethical reflection. The following are propositions for further discussion in light of this presentation::

Soteriology:

- Predestination should include more attention on the divine objective of gaining adopted children and heirs for God/.
- Adoption should have greater relative emphasis than it does now, in comparison with regeneration, in framing what it means to be in God's family.

Eschatology: Adoption as hope of bodily redemption should occupy a greater prominence than it does now.

- How is the "already" adoption related to the "not yet" adoption in Rom. 8:23?
- How could getting this right change the way we wait and groan until the consummation?

Ecclesiology: The church animated as a community of adopted children, all redeemed from slavery and all heirs of a kingdom, would better practice the new life in Christ the Son.

Pneumatology:

- The experience of the indwelling Spirit should be more closely associated with the liberty of sons to relate to holy God as Father, keeping both bold access and reverent fear together.
- The fruit and gifts of the Spirit should be perceived as expressions of adoptive sonship, avoiding the temptation to make them markers of maturity or of prominence.

Anthropology:

- Adopted sons of God by union with Christ and indwelling of his Spirit are the "new man" and should be acting as God's image in Christ.
  - What kind of humanity can slaves inhabit?
  - What kind of humanity can liberated sons inhabit?
- Adopted sons in Christ can thereby experience relational and psychological wholeness not otherwise available.

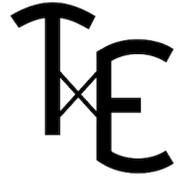
Sanctification/Transformation: If being God's children includes both his redemptive claim on us and our share in his eternal kingdom, it should counterbalance much sentimentality and sociology associated with discussions of sonship.

Christology: Along with solid trinitarian theology about the Son, Christ should be understood in terms of his sonship as representative (Israel fulfilled) and royal (David reigning).

Doxology: Along with worshiping Jesus as co-eternal Son, we should worship him as representative son and royal son. This would magnify his connection to the history and purpose of natural Israel and his preeminence in matters political and international.



# Theological Roundtable 2025



Kenny D. Thacker  
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## EXPERIENCING UNION IN COMMUNION

I will turn sixty-four in a couple of weeks and I am constantly discovering things that have or are shifting about myself. One being, my eyeglasses are more important than they used to be. I don't need them as much for close work, so in my office and studio as I move between laptops, books, charts and guitars, I'm taking them off and putting them on a thousand times a day. There have been more times than I care to admit that I've found myself straining to see something clearly and not be able to locate my glasses in close proximity only to find them later scooted up on my head. The very expensive tool that was designed to clarify my vision was just inches away from alleviating my strain and enabling me to see clearly. I've found this season of giving attention to the topic of union with Christ has had a similar effect.

A prolonged, focused consideration on our union with Christ has given me clarity in areas of concern I carry for the church in our current culture. For time's sake, I've chosen only one to highlight today. My intention is to make an appeal for all of us to give attention to the neglected teaching of union with Christ. This truth is a strong magnet designed to draw our people out of being individual spectators conditioned to be consumers and into corporate minded participants who thrive on approaching life as contributors.

Perhaps the most devious, covert enemy of the gospel we contend with in our day is individualized Christianity. Marcus Johnson's book, *One With Christ*, devotes two helpful chapters to this. In them we see how the tendency of attempting to describe and analyze the doctrine of salvation separately from the doctrine of the church has somewhat diminished the participatory and relational aspects of being a Christian. As a result, western believers see their base relationship with God as, "I am a son or daughter". In sharp contrast, eastern believers are more apt to identify their base relationship with God as "I am a member of the family." It's basically a "me and Jesus" instead of a "me and you and Jesus" approach to Christianity.

Factors such as culture, politics, lopsided emphasis on church growth, have simultaneously resulted in an identity crisis that has produced a modern-day Christian who lives mostly unaware of the influence of his blended identity. For instance, the fact that I am a white, Kentucky-born, Texas-residing male comes to bear on the way I process life and make decisions. We need to be aware of our various layers. Any identifier we connect to Christian is a layer we'll eventually have to work through and lay aside. The gospel eliminates the need for hyphenated Christianity.

The American part of who we are understands freedom as the right, “to do what I want, when and how I want.” There’s a reason we like John Wayne. Rugged individualism. Yet, if we’d lean into the Christian part of who we are we’d find freedom better understood as liberating restraints that hold us securely within parameters set by the ultimate authority of our Creator. And, we’d better understand and apply the word “you” in the scriptures as usually being plural.

Here are a few examples of how individuating your relationship to Christ results in negative impact. Church attendance becomes discretionary. It is viewed as a value add to life, unless there is something else more appealing at the moment. Fellowship is reduced to a superficial greeting, or an hour of mostly surface conversation for the statistically few who attend a mid-week small group or service with any sort of regularity. Busy personal and family schedules at best limit, and at worst prevent deeper interaction with our spiritual families. While there’s a lot to be said for “minding your own business” your kingdom citizenship requires leaving space for others beyond that. For instance, Paul instructs “you (plural) who are spiritual” to restore anyone around you caught in a transgression (Galatians 6:1). This relatively simple statement has at least three presuppositions; 1) you are aware of the situation 2) you care enough to be inconvenienced 3) you are equipped with enough gospel for the mission.

The people in our churches have been pre-conditioned to be governed by their individual preferences. By and large, they listen to sermons for themselves as individuals and make decisions as to if and how they’ll make application to their lives by themselves. I believe one helpful exercise for us as pastors would be to think through how preaching to a community of believers differs from preaching to a room full of individuals. (Members of the community should listen in the same way)

Then, preachers need to have an honest evaluation of our own preaching in light of that, as long as we don’t evaluate ourselves by ourselves. Suffice it to say, salvation is deeply *personal* but was never intended to be *private*.

Our union with Christ should never be considered separately from our union with each other. We lose so much richness of life by allowing the practice of “preferring one another” (Romans 12:10) to be pushed by the wayside due to inconvenience and busyness. When we lose sight of our joining together with one another being as true and binding as our joining with Christ, the entire church suffers and loses power and influence in the community.

Jesus announced how our primary identity serves as our most powerful witness when He said,

*“A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another: just as I have loved you, you also are to love one another. By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.” – John 13: 34-35 (ESV)*

The Body of Christ isn't merely a metaphorical illustration, it's a much-needed reality of intimate interaction between me, you and Jesus. Paul addresses this sort of intimate interaction in concentrated form in his first letter to the Corinthian church. In the latter part of his letter he gives instruction on how we are to conduct ourselves as the family of God, as a community of believers. And multiple times he uses a strong word; it's the Greek word "**koinonia**". It's a word that at its core means **intimate interaction** (Check Strongs). It involves knowing and being known while simultaneously being loved, something most people don't really believe can happen.

We tend to think we can have one or the other. If you love me you can't fully know me because if you fully know me you won't love me. Yet amazingly, God does both, and equips us and expects us to follow suit with each other. And He gave us a way to remind us and refresh us in His equipping and expectancy in a continual way, but also a communal way. Earlier I described my eyeglasses as a tool that help me see things clearly for what they are. God has gifted us with a wonderful way to both experience and feature the kind of communal fellowship afforded us by union with Christ. This happens both vertically and horizontally when we come together around the table of the Lord. We come as a body, a community, a family.

For the record, I don't believe in transubstantiation. I don't believe that the bread and wine literally become the body and blood. But neither do I believe that the elements are merely symbolic reminders. I believe there's an impartation of grace, it's a "means of grace". I believe that somehow, albeit spiritually and mysteriously, Christ is present in the elements. When we don't know to expect such an encounter it obviously hinders our faith for participating in it.

One day a huge crowd was pressed in against Jesus. There was a woman who needed healing that simply believed that if she touched Jesus she'd be healed. Faith. She wasn't trying to barter. As a matter of fact, she was trying to go unnoticed. As she touched the hem of His garment. Jesus stopped in his tracks. "**Who touched Me?**" I imagine the disciples were thinking, "Uh, everybody." He said, "**No, somebody came with faith for intimate interaction.**" Most of us don't approach the table like that. We're more likely to expect an encounter during the musical expression of worship than we are at the table. We have been conditioned to reach for an encounter with Jesus set to music. We anticipate our faith being energized in musical worship, or when the gifts are exercised, and that's correct, it just isn't complete.

Paul uses the same word for fellowship (or participation) in **1 Cor 10:16**. "The cup of blessing that we bless, is it not a participation [intimate interaction] in the blood of Christ. The bread that we break, is it not a participation [intimate interaction] with the body of Christ?" That needs some thinking about. I'm not convinced very many of our people come to the table expecting an intimate encounter with Jesus, let alone with each other.

God no longer does business with His children at an altar. He does business with and among His children at the family table. We would be more comfortable at an altar where we feel like we're bringing an offering that costs us something. Yet, there no longer remains a sacrifice for sin (Hebrews 10:26) except the one given freely by Jesus. By God's design, the table is a place of healing, restoration and transformation. Whatever else pastors do, our role demands placing a high priority on tending a place where a merciful God encounters sinful men. Of course, God's people meet Him in personal prayer and the scriptures. My appeal is for us to give attention to communion in a way that fosters expectancy of intimate interaction both vertically and horizontally as a community of believers.

I find it very interesting that in **1 Cor 11:17-22**, right before the very familiar communion instructions, Paul described and decried an incredibly self-centered gathering of the saints. Then he gives the instruction as he received from the Lord, and comes back to warn. "Hey, don't do this in an unworthy manner. It's dangerous." Now, there's a tension most pastors experience around these warnings. It's something like this. On one hand it's, "**You better not allow just anyone to participate.**" And on the other hand, "**You better not deny anybody coming to the table.**" That's a mysterious tension that I'm coming to love.

*Vs 29: "For anyone who eats and drinks without discerning the body eats and drinks judgment on himself."*

I don't pretend to fully understand this for a moment, but I know the table is a place God intends to dispense grace and not judgment. I think, at least in part, the danger that Paul is warning about in not rightly discerning the body is approaching the table focused only on the vertical aspect and ignoring the horizontal. I think it's an indictment against our individualized Christianity.

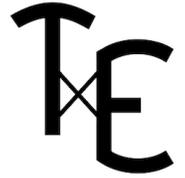
If I am even partially right, that would help explain the anemic, weak, dying condition of much of the American church.

The Table of the Lord is such a splendid, beautiful place to herald the glorious truth of union with Christ. It's a place to not only remember, but to reengage, to have a place we can have faith for grace-filled, transformative, relational interaction with God and with each other. It's a wonderful place to invite and encourage participation.

I hope we learn to facilitate and participate in the table in a deeper, fuller way. I hope we can gain such appreciation that we're willing to pause all other activity and give it the time, attention and frequency it deserves in our services. I pray God gives us the wisdom to cultivate a culture of expectancy and anticipation of intimate interaction as those in union with Him and with one another.



# Theological Roundtable 2025



Alan Wright  
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## ATTACHMENT TO GOD

### INTRODUCTION

I'm fresh from a twelve-year-old birthday party for one of the newest "additions" to our family. Rules prohibit publishing detailed information about children in foster care, so I'll keep the kids unnamed. Our son and daughter-in-law, feeling compelled by the Spirit, opened their home to an 11-year-old girl and her 11-month-old sibling. The call came on a Friday night in June – two abandoned sisters needed a home. An hour later, Bennett and Amy didn't just have their own two-year-old Mia in the home – suddenly there were five under the roof. It's unclear how long they'll have them, whether months or forever. But the investment of love began right away.

Though the older girl's first language is Spanish, she speaks English passably. Well enough for me to overhear this conversation:

*11-year-old girl: "It's not fair, my sister gets a lot more attention because she's a baby."*

*Daughter-in-law: "We care for you just as much."*

*11-year-old girl: "But she gets more."*

*Daughter-in-law: "At night after the two little ones go to bed, we always have an hour or more just with you."*

*11-year-old girl: "Yeah, but she gets way more hugs and kisses and gets held all the time."*

*I listened and marveled that the abandoned adolescent knew herself that well, that she knows what she wants. She knows what she craves.*

*Psychiatrist Curt Thompson begins his chapter on "Attachment" in Anatomy of the Soul with these words:*

*"What do you crave most in life?*

*Chocolate? The Ferrari F430? A vacation in Fiji? Sex?*

*Actually, there is something each of us wants more – even more than the air we breathe: Connection."<sup>i</sup>*

From our first cry to our final breath, we crave attachment. Without secure attachment, infants cannot grow into emotionally healthy human beings. Without secure attachment, we'll never be at peace in this world and we'll never move confidently into our spheres of influence for the right reasons.

Attachment theory has shown that what a child needs most from parents in a healthy home isn't all the good instruction, or guidance, or advocacy (as important as those gifts are)—what the child needs most is a mystical love connection with the parent(s). This deep sense of connection is the emotional womb in which the child is shaped.

What we have come to learn about the human need for attachment can help us understand what is most needed in our connection with God. Union with Christ is attachment with God. In this mysterious union, we are joined in love with God. And, in that inseparable connection with God in Christ, we find our security and strength and every spiritual blessing.

This paper explores the analogies of human attachment and its benefits with the promise and glories of attachment with God for everyone who has been “accepted in the Beloved.” (Eph. 1:6, NKJV)

## **ATTACHMENT THEORY**

Modern brain research is proving what the Gospel has timelessly asserted. We aren't just happier when we are connected with other human beings—we are formed by our connections.

Curt Thompson explains: “Attachment theory supports the supposition that there is no such thing as an individual brain, not even an individual neuron. In fact, researchers have discovered that the way we attach shapes the neural networks that are the vehicles of the attachment process itself.”<sup>ii</sup>

As surely as the nourishment of milk helps form the infant's physical being, the loving attachment of the nursing infant to the parent or caregiver forms the child's mind, literally.

Again, Thompson elucidates: “The neuroscience is clear: the concept of a single functioning neuron or a single functioning brain simply does not exist in nature. Without input from other neurons, a single neuron will die. Likewise, without input from other minds, a single mind becomes anxious, then depressed, then hopeless, and then dies, either by intentional means (suicide) or more passive forms of poor self-care. It is not good for a man or woman—or a neuron or a brain—to be alone.”<sup>iii</sup>

The newborn, of course, cannot reflect consciously on this process. The developing left brain cannot reason it out—hmm, I'm feeling pretty secure because my mom is doing a

good job of staying attuned to my unspoken needs and she is providing plenty of contact comfort. I think I'll be a secure human. The formation of the child's soul is simply happening. It is a process the child does not understand or analyze. Neurons in the infant's lower brain and right hemisphere are firing and wiring with every interaction with the parent. A child's capacity to regulate her emotions, feel at peace, and move confidently into the world, are all at stake. Children are being shaped by their interpersonal interactions.

## **A NEW WAY TO UNDERSTAND WHAT IT MEANS TO BE A CHILD OF GOD?**

Neurotheologian Jim Wilder has asserted that "loving attachment to God [could] be how salvation saves us from our sin."<sup>iv</sup>

Thinking of the Christian experience and Christian discipleship as attachment with God goes far to correct superficial ideas of salvation as walking an aisle or praying a prayer or assenting to doctrines. When Jesus forecast the day when many will find themselves outside the kingdom, He shocked His listeners:

"On that day many will say to me, 'Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and cast out demons in your name, and do many mighty works in your name?' 23 And then will I declare to them, 'I never knew you; depart from me, you workers of lawlessness.'" (Matthew 7:22-23 ESV)

It is shocking because calling Jesus "Lord, Lord" and bearing fruit and doing miraculous works are often heralded as the very marks of Christian discipleship. But Jesus values the intimacy of personal connection. He wants attachment. Of course, Christ also values fruitfulness. But He prioritizes personal connection:

"Abide 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." (John 15:4 ESV)

As with an infant child, who, from the moment of birth, is seeking connection, so we are in the moment of rebirth (and every moment thereafter) seeking spiritual connection.

British researcher John Bowlby pioneered attachment theory as he studied the emotional bonds between little children and their primary caregivers. He theorized that the parent-child relationship could provide a "secure base" out of which the child could confidently explore their environment.

The lessons of the research became clear: security is formed, not simply chosen or "worked on."

When God speaks of Himself as the source of our security, He offers something much

richer than a static sense of fortress—He offers Himself: “... fear not, for I am with you; be not dismayed, for I am your God...” (Isaiah 41:10 ESV)

Deep security in the Christian’s heart emerges from attaching to God in love:

“So we have come to know and to believe the love that God has for us. God is love, and whoever abides in love abides in God, and God abides in him. By this is love perfected with us, so that we may have confidence for the day of judgment, because as he is so also are we in this world. There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear. For fear has to do with punishment, and whoever fears has not been perfected in love.” (1 John 4:16–18 ESV)

## **MORE ABOUT ATTACHMENT THEORY**

Attachment theory researchers have observed and measured a child’s ability to explore a room and experiment with new toys while the child’s mother is present as compared to when the mother has stepped out of the room. From the research, four distinct attachment patterns have been theorized:

1. Secure attachment
2. Insecure–Avoidant
3. Insecure–Ambivalent/Anxious
4. Insecure–Disorganized

Secure attachment manifests as the capacity for trust, balance, and safety; the Insecure–Anxious pattern manifests as clingy behavior with fear of abandonment; Insecure–Avoidant attachment shows up in a tendency to keep distances, fearing dependence; and Insecure–Disorganized attachment manifests as inner conflict, fear of both closeness and distance. Each attachment mode has typical behavioral expressions in both childhood and adulthood. The pattern developed in childhood will likely follow the person into adulthood (as much as 80% of the time).<sup>v</sup>

In other words, how a child behaves both in childhood and adulthood is largely a function of attachment patterns.

But it is not only the behaviors of the child at stake—it is the child’s whole identity.

Thompson asserts that a child “...will see herself and come to understand herself primarily through what she witnesses in her mother’s responses.”<sup>vi</sup>

Early in life, the young child’s lower brain and right hemisphere will aid in “reading” what others are thinking of him. Later, as the left mode becomes more developed, the child can bring language to what was “sensed”: I’m loved. I’m a bother. I’m good at some stuff. I’m a failure. Hence, secure attachment not only leads to ongoing security in a person’s heart, but also leads to identity formation that fosters purpose and hope.

Parents who are attuned to their children's emotions and responsive to their needs help establish secure attachment. It's the steadiness of compassion and understanding that creates an environment of safety. Of course, no earthly parent does this perfectly. Peter Fonagy, a British psychoanalyst and researcher in the field of attachment, estimates that even the best, most attuned parent gets it right about 50% of the time.

We need a Father who attunes to us reliably all the time. If we are to be healed of our insecurities that have arisen from flawed earthly attachment, we need to experience flawless divine attachment. We need to experience perfect love.

The constant peace, unflinching courage, and resolute purpose on display in Jesus' life flowed from an infinitely secure attachment to His Father. Jesus assured the disciples, "Believe me that I am in the Father and the Father is in me...." (John 14:11 ESV) It is more than a theological statement – it is an expression of secure attachment.

All of the "works" of Jesus' ministry flowed from His secure attachment with the Father: "Believe me that I am in the Father and the Father is in me, or else believe on account of the works themselves." (John 14:11 ESV)

Likewise, God designed humans to bear fruit only via attachment with Him: "I 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." (John 15:5 ESV)

Anyone who wants to live a fruitful spiritual life does well to focus on the "abiding" in Christ. Spiritual disciplines are instrumental in the Christian life not because they are efforts to be a "good Christian," but rather because they are a means of grace that fosters attachment with God.

## **ACCEPTED IN THE BELOVED**

"This is the definition of joy: I want to be with you. Joy is relational in its essence." (Jim Wilder, Michael Hendricks)<sup>vii</sup>

Brain science has shown that joy emerges when we see another who accepts or delights in us. The infant lower brain and right hemisphere respond to a mother's smile and, through that affirming look and soothing touch, the child begins attaching. Where there is no deep acceptance, there can be no attachment. Where there is no attachment, there is no security.

Ephesians 1:6 in the ESV describes us as "blessed ... in the Beloved." The old language (KJV and NKJV) reads: "... accepted in the Beloved." The verb, *charitoo*, finds its root in *charis*. We are "graced" in the Beloved. We are favored – given special privilege and place. We are smiled upon.

Why is our blessedness and acceptance (our attachment) in the Beloved? The beauty

and power of the proclaimed kerygma is found in the remarkable assurance: because of the finished work of Christ, the gulf of separation between humanity and God has been remedied, and all who recognize and receive the gift of Christ are radically and permanently accepted. They come under the eternal smile of God. Regenerated lives are “re-attached” to God. This glorious reconnection is not initiated nor merited by the righteousness of the believer but is solely accomplished by Christ.

The Son is, and always has been, perfectly attached with the Father. The believer, by the gift of justification, is declared to be “in Christ.” All beauty and benefit for the believer is thus summed by his new status as “blessed ... in the Beloved.” (Ephesians 1:6) To be a Christian is “to belong to Jesus Christ” (Romans 1:6). Our blessedness is in “the Beloved,” the Son who redeemed us. The approval that should have been granted only to the Son has been lavished on all His children, and there, under the radiance of His countenance, the children sense their attachment to God.

At the inauguration of Jesus’ earthly ministry amidst the baptismal waters, the Father joyfully declared “this is my Beloved Son” (see also the transfiguration scene, Matt. 17:5 and 2 Peter 1:17). The word for “beloved” adapts the famous word for God’s covenantal love, literally reading: “This is my Agapetos.” This is the recipient of New Covenant agape love. This is the One in whom I fully delight and eternally love. This is the Son to whom I am perfectly attached.

Remarkably, the word the Father used to describe the Son became Paul’s favorite term of endearment for the people of God (e.g., Rom 1:7; 1 Cor. 4:14; Phil. 2:12). We are the new *agapetoi* – those that are recipients of God’s perfect *agape*. In assigning to believers the same term of endearment that the Father spoke over the only begotten Son, God has made clear that we are loved and accepted in the same manner, to the same degree, and with the same affection that the Father loves the Son. Jesus said it plainly: “As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you.” (John 15:9).

Such revelation is momentous for at least two reasons. First, it means we are the objects of divine delight. When the heart knows this and experiences the very love that flows eternally within the Triune Godhead, this knowledge becomes the truest and best source of all human joy.

Secondly, being declared His *agapetos* means that the believer is identified by God’s love and commitment toward us, not by the believer’s own love and commitment for God. It might be truly said of believers, “they’ll know we are Christians by our love,” but we do not become Christians or remain Christians because of our love for God. This is love, not that we first loved Him. (1 John 4:10)

We are defined as “the beloved” – the ones loved by God perfectly. We are the ones “accepted,” graced, by God. Infants attach only when loved and cared for. The craving to attach might move a child toward a caregiver. The craving to attach might “prove”

that she is made for connection. But only the initiating love of a selfless caregiver can begin attachment.

This is momentous because herein is the security of the believer. We are secure in His love for us. We are held safe because of His *agape* toward us. Thus, if our affections for God ebb, flow, or fail toward Him, we are not lost. We are safe. There is no sin or failure in the believer's life that can alter his attachment to God because once in the Beloved, we are forever beloved. We cannot become more secure. Dane Ortlund has put it candidly, wonderfully: "We will be less sinful in the next life than we are now, but we will not be any more secure in the next life than we are now. If you are united to Christ, you are as good as in heaven already."<sup>viii</sup>

## CONCLUSIONS

- The invitation to salvation might be thought of as an invitation to be attached to God in Christ
- Christian preaching and discipleship ministries should foster believers' sense of secure attachment, never erode it
- In the way that a parent provides a secure base from which a securely attached child can confidently explore the world, so the believer's boldness emerges from his belovedness.
- In the way that a growing child learns to regulate her emotions from the security of attachment love, so the believer's character (fruit of the Spirit) grows from attachment as God's *agapetos*.
- As the child's formation does not happen in isolation, so the disciple's maturation does not (cannot) happen in isolation.

In short, as the whole blessedness of the child is dependent upon shared life with the parent, all the blessedness of the Christian life is found "in Christ" – in mystical union with Christ.

As God planned human life to flourish from the secure base of parental attachment, so He has designed our lives in Christ to flow outwardly with real obedience from a foundation of secure attachment to the Lord.

Jesus declared "If you love me, you will keep my commandments." (John 14:15). Be loved. Live loved.

Obedience—right living, godly living, living in a good and holy way, with purity, kindness, boldness, courage – flows out of the love/attachment relationship with God.

If we are struggling with temptation or behaving disobediently, the last thing we need is a threat of God's displeasure – we need the assurances of our attachment with God.

Insecurity creates the anxiety that fosters sin and addiction. Felt affection and assured attachment create inward security that conquers sin.

I spoke with a long-time staff partner in the church parking lot last week. Nate is one of a kind. A free spirit. Never married, musician, audio technician, who grew up in a rare and marvelous family, Nate had his old truck in the church driveway and his dog was in the front seat. The window was down and there, panting and smiling with his paws hanging was the ugly-enough-to-be-cute, part-pug mutt.

What's that dog's name? I asked.

*"Yoda," Nate told me.*

*"I'm impressed that he's not jumping out of that car with the window wide open like that," I mused. "The beagle we raised would have been long gone after a squirrel and maybe never back again."*

Then Nate told me the story of Yoda:

*"I got him from Matt (one of Reynolda's worship venue leaders). When they had their first baby, they decided to get rid of the dog and I said I'd take him under one condition – if he runs away, I'm not going after him. If he wants to stay with me, I'll love him and take care of him. But we need to have an understanding, if he runs and gets out onto the busy Reynolda Road and something happens to him, we can't have any hard feelings."*

So, Nate explained, he took Yoda home. Fed him. Loved him. Played with him. And one day, he let him out of the house with no fence and no leash. At first, it seemed Yoda was gone. And Nate didn't go after him. But, before too long, Yoda came back.

"Ever since," Nate said, "he never runs away. I can leave him in the yard or the windows down in the truck and he never runs."

Lesson learned – the truly beloved don't run away. Instead, they love in return.

Looking at Yoda waiting happily for his master to get his church chores done, I thought of that prodigal Father who didn't keep his younger son on a leash or in a fence, but waited, trusted, that the early attachment would stick – would one day draw the child home. Obedience, maturity, boldness, and profound love for God do not happen in the believer's life because of a divine leash or fence. Christian flourishing and fruitfulness flow from love attachment.

## END NOTES:

- <sup>i</sup> Curt Thompson, *Anatomy of the Soul: Surprising Connections Between Neuroscience and Spiritual Practices That Can Transform Your Life and Relationships*, Kindle location, 2170.
- <sup>ii</sup> Thompson, Kindle location 2177
- <sup>iii</sup> Thompson, Kindle location 2215
- <sup>iv</sup> Jim Wilder, *Renovated: God, Dallas Willard, and the Church That Transforms* Kindle location 1191.
- <sup>v</sup> A summary of the patterns:
1. Secure Attachment
    - Core Pattern: Comfort with closeness, trust, and interdependence.
    - Childhood Roots: Formed when caregivers are consistently responsive, emotionally attuned, and dependable.
    - Adult Expression: People with secure attachment feel comfortable with intimacy, trust others, regulate emotions well, and have healthy boundaries. They can both give and receive support easily.
  2. Avoidant (Insecure-Dismissing) Attachment
    - Core Pattern: Discomfort with dependence and emotional closeness.
    - Childhood Roots: Typically arises when caregivers are emotionally unavailable, dismissive, or rejecting of needs for comfort and closeness.
    - Adult Expression: These individuals tend to value independence, suppress emotions, downplay the importance of relationships, and may keep partners at a distance to avoid vulnerability.
  3. Anxious (Insecure-Preoccupied) Attachment
    - Core Pattern: Fear of abandonment and preoccupation with closeness.
    - Childhood Roots: Often develops when caregiving is inconsistent – sometimes nurturing, other times neglectful – creating uncertainty about availability.
    - Adult Expression: Adults with this style often seek reassurance, may appear “clingy,” worry about rejection, and can become overly focused on their partner’s moods or availability.
  4. Disorganized (Insecure-Fearful) Attachment
    - Core Pattern: Push-pull dynamic – desire closeness but fear it at the same time.
    - Childhood Roots: Often results from trauma, abuse, or frightening/unpredictable caregiving – where the caregiver is both a source of comfort and fear.
    - Adult Expression: Adults with this style may struggle with unresolved trauma, show contradictory behaviors (seeking closeness but then withdrawing), and often feel unsafe in relationships.
- <sup>vi</sup> Thompson, Kindle location 2318
- <sup>vii</sup> Wilder, Jim; Hendricks, Michel. *The Other Half of Church: Christian Community, Brain Science, and Overcoming Spiritual Stagnation* (p. 60). Kindle Edition.
- <sup>viii</sup> Ortlund, *Gentle and Lowly: The Heart of Christ for Sinners and Sufferers*, p. 196