

Oneness with Christ

The typical question people ask me about union with Christ tends to go something like this: “Union with Christ seems important and it sounds great, possibly life-changing—but what exactly does it mean?” And it isn’t that these people haven’t read their bible a lot, very often they have. Their instincts are exactly right. Union and participation with Jesus (despite sounding technical) is vital theologically, pastorally and for every individual. As the first of these two articles (for Union!) on union with Christ in John will explain, this oneness with Christ is life. It *is* eternal life. It is an astonishingly precious, intimate, lively relationship of love and friendship with Jesus, the Son. It is, in fact, the most sublime thing in the universe in which we can be involved.

The often-repeated question—what exactly is union with Christ—goes to show that union has sometimes taken a backseat in presentation and preaching of the gospel today. At risk of over-generalising, there is sometimes a lack of theological confidence preachers (and Christians in general) feel about what is meant by union with Christ, which then leads to a reluctance to speak in much depth about it.

In an interview released recently, after J.I. Packer’s walk with Jesus reached its happy destination, Packer couldn’t have given a higher priority to union. He says that, in his view, “union with Christ is *the central category for apostolic thinking*...about the substance, the reality, of the salvation that is ours when we put faith in Christ.”^[1] Packer, of course, was blessed by reading the Puritans. And in their Westminster Standards, the very heart of the gift of salvation is, you guessed it, “being *united with Christ* by Spirit-worked faith.”^[2] Union with Christ also stands out in the writings of Luther, Calvin, Owen and Edwards, to name just a few.

Descriptions of a beautiful marriage are not the same thing as the actual experience of the relationship (a note of caution for all theologians, myself included!), but they can guide us into deeper and more joyful partnership. By analogy, that’s my prayer and hope for our own friendship with Christ as I write. Marriages are deep (they take time to understand), and they are also beautiful.

"In Christ" in the New Testament

In his letters, Paul very frequently uses the expression “in Christ,” and talks about believers dying and being raised “with Christ.” The gospel according to John and 1 John also use language that is spatial, speaking of the “Me in you and you in Me,” two-way relationship between God and believers. A few examples from across the New Testament canon remind us that such spatial language is widespread: John 6:56, 14:20; Galatians 2:20; Ephesians 1:3; 1 Peter 5:14; 1 John 4:15 and Revelation 1:9. The New Testament also tells us that believers possess and participate (or share) in seemingly divine things such as Christ’s life and glory. Since believers do not become God, in what sense do they participate in the divine life?

Different writers emphasise different aspects of Pauline union with Christ, focusing on either the relational aspect or the eschatological aspect (particularly the resurrection life of “the age to come,” begun now). Constantine Campbell has found that “in Christ” in Paul has a broad range of

meanings including: God's acts of kindness through Christ; believers' location in the realm of Christ; and believers' incorporation in Christ's body.^[3] Perhaps surprisingly, we need more exegetical work across the New Testament to underpin our theological synthesis.

This article draws on recent work by the author examining "Me in you and you in Me" relationship in the Johannine writings.^[4] The fourth gospel and 1 John point us towards a New Testament theology of union with Christ in which a *particular kind of relationship* with Christ has already brought the believer into the life of the age to come. The Johannine writings are sometimes relatively neglected for understanding union with Christ, but hold out to us an exhilarating and particularly focused, hi-definition view of oneness with Christ.

"Me in you and you in Me" relationship in John

In the farewell discourse (John 13-17), Jesus discloses himself to his disciples before returning to the Father, explaining to them the life of love that is "in him." The extended parable of the living vine and its branches springs to mind. In an earlier example, in John 14:20, Jesus says, "In that day you will know that I am in my Father, and *you in me, and I in you.*" Jesus and believers are *in-one-another* (both individual believers and believers together). This is the kind of language John uses to describe oneness in the gospel. Strikingly, it is the language he uses to describe the oneness of the Father and the Son.

First, let me give you the conclusion from exegesis across the Johannine gospel and epistles, and then try to convey something of its depth and beauty. **Union with Christ in John is this in-one-another, "Me in you and you in Me" relationship with the Son-Father, by the Spirit. In short, it is relational oneness with Jesus.** If you know who the Son is, that probably sounds both amazing and exciting—and it is!

What I'm going to describe is a helicopter view of detailed exegetical work on John 6, John 13-17 and 1 John (the Scripture references I give are only indicative). Union with Christ in the Johannine gospel and epistles is the intimate, loving, *relational participation* of the believer and God. They are involved in one another's life, affections, ways and work. If you're trusting Jesus, pause to consider that you have that kind of involvement in the life of God! And it is a particular kind of relationship—it is *in-one-anotherness*, in-one-another relationship between the believer and God. It is a beautiful kind of oneness with Jesus. Like any enduring relationship of love (think of marriage), it is both a state of affairs and an active sharing, each in the life of the other, rather like a two-way dance.

This "Me in you and you in Me" relationship with the Son-Father has its ever-flowing *source* in the Father's love (1 John 4:7-21), and in the Son, his propitiatory death for us (John 6:51-58) and his resurrection-return (John 14:18-21). From our side, it involves (and always coincides with) acceptance of the truth about Jesus (1 John 2:19-27; 1 John 4), personal trust in him and his death (John 6:35-40, 53-57), and inward transformation resulting in Christ-like love (John 15:1-17).

There are important and striking connections in the Johannine writings with being a child or son of God, and with "eternal life" (that is, "the life of the age to come," already begun here). To have been born of God, and so made his child, *is* to have been brought into this life-giving union with Christ by the Spirit (1 John 3:6-10), who remains in the individual (John 14:15-23). Being a child of God and this oneness with Christ are two descriptions of the same reality. People who are in this astonishing, in-one-another relationship with Jesus themselves participate, as one, in Jesus' mission (John 17:20-26) and share in his character and his kind of love (John 15:1-17).

More generally, the "commencement–walk–destination" of the journey of the child of God, in "in-one-another" relationship with God, is strikingly similar to that of the journey of *the* Son in this world (in "in-one-another" relationship with his Father). The believer participates with Jesus in his journey (as we will explore in the second of these articles).

Union with Christ in John, then, is the oneness or, more specifically, the *in-one-anotherness* of Son-Father and disciples: a permanent, dynamic relationship of mutual love, presence, and knowledge, and of shared work and friendship. It's probably already clear that, for us human beings, such a relationship cannot be surpassed. But there is more. Jesus uses the same *in-one-anotherness* to describe his own relationship as the Son with his Father. Using the same language(!) emphasises the sublime intimacy and closeness of *our* relationship with the Son. Just pause for a moment to reflect on and drink in the fact that Jesus loves you as the Father loves the Son (John 15:9, 17:26).

And, when you think about it, the very construction of "Me in you and you in Me" language itself emphasises just how two-way this relationship of love is: we reciprocate God's love and he reciprocates ours, in the context of intimate, shared, active friendship. "Me in you and you in Me" is talking about the presence and participation of each person—Jesus and you—in the life of the other, a presence so close and so profound that it is described as "internal" to the other. If that sounds like heaven already meeting and participating in our earthly lives in an astonishingly precious way, you're getting the idea! We can't help also thinking of Paul's portrayal of the relationship between Christ and the church in terms of a marriage relationship in Ephesians 5:22-33. Recent work by Kevin Vanhoozer on Pauline union with Christ points in a similar direction: being in union with Christ in Paul is being in communion with the Trinity (a relational "place"), where one dynamically communes with Christ (a relational activity in that "place").^[5] As we grasp these realities, they take our breath away.

"Life" in the age to come

We've already proposed that John's gospel and 1 John point us towards a NT theology of union with Christ in which a particular kind of relationship with Jesus has already brought the believer into the life of the age to come. What emerges, in addition, from exegesis of the Johannine gospel and epistles is very striking (and is what our hearts know at the deepest level): this relationship of oneness with Christ *is* the life we were made for. More specifically, being in in-one-another relationship with the Son *is* (by which I mean "is coextensive with") being in and experiencing the life of the age to come. (See, e.g., John 6:51-58 and 6:54-57 in particular; 14:2, 23; the life of the vine and branches in John 15; and 17:3).

From a biblical-theological perspective, this makes good sense. The Old Testament covenants, which bestow God's relational presence with his people, reach their culmination and climax in "in-one-another" relationship with Christ. This becomes clear when we trace the progression of the aspects of God's relationship with his people in the OT covenants and see them being fulfilled in the features of in-one-anotherness with Christ that we have just seen. To be under the new covenant is to be in union with Christ. Similarly, the revelatory, relational presence of God in the temples of the OT (the Garden of Eden, tabernacle and physical temple) pointed towards, and climaxes in, Jesus and "in-one-anotherness" with him. Indeed, "in-one-another" relationship with God and "the life of the age to come" (*zōē aiōnios*) are shown as the same thing in the Johannine gospel and epistles because it is the full consummation of that "in-one-another" relationship with God that defines and characterises the life of the epoch still to come.

You're at one with Jesus already. The life of worship is a life of intimate friendship and love, a two-way dance with God himself. Witness and holiness are a sharing in life-giving things close to

the Lord's heart. The sweetness, intimacy and partnership of the engagement has begun, and the full joys of in-one-another relationship with Jesus await us.

Endnotes

[1] Accessed online on 17 August 2020 at www.desiringgod.org/interviews/john-piper-interviews-j-i-packer (emphasis added).

[2] Richard B. Gaffin, "Union with Christ: Some Biblical and Theological Reflections," in *Always Reforming: Explorations in Systematic Theology*, ed. A. T. B. McGowan (Leicester: Apollos, 2006), 282 (emphasis added).

[3] Constantine R. Campbell, *Paul and Union with Christ: An Exegetical and Theological Study* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2012).

[4] Clive G. Bowsher, *Life in the Son: Johannine Oneness and Participation with Christ*, New Studies in Biblical Theology, ed. D.A. Carson (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, forthcoming).

[5] Kevin J. Vanhoozer, "From 'Blessed in Christ' to 'Being in Christ'," in *"In Christ" in Paul: Explorations in Paul's Theology of Union and Participation*, ed. Michael J. Thate, Kevin J. Vanhoozer, and Constantine R. Campbell, WUNT 2:384 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2014), 27-29.



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Spirituality, Union with Christ