

Union With Christ—Study 2

Trevor Faggotter — 9th November, 2023. Coro Studies.

ALIVE TO GOD IN CHRIST JESUS

When the Spirit of God comes to indwell a person, and they rock up at home, or at church ‘**alive to God in Christ Jesus**’ (Romans 6:11), and walking ‘**in newness of life**’ (Romans 6:4), there is almost always a new and amazing story to be told about the very personal, humanising love of God, that has been made known to them, through the activity of the ascended Jesus.

The Father’s love produces a profound, enduring change in the life, thought and action of such a person, in union with Christ. Hopefully the community of faith rejoice anew as they too, reflect, and recall their early days of faith. The Living God is at work. The wonderful, expansive dimensions of life, by faith, in Christ, as part of the **new creation** (1Corinthians 5:17) begin to be explored, as the Living Word comes to that person—again and again. The grand insights given to the people of God, to prophets and the apostles fill human hearts with gladness, and the Spirit brings us into with God, and all his great purposes.

UNION WITH CHRIST—LIFE “IN” CHRIST

Jesus spoke of himself as the vine, and his people in union with him as the branches (John 15:5). The apostles addressed believers as the ‘**saints in Christ Jesus**’ (Phil. 1:1), and as those ‘**sanctified in Christ Jesus**’ (1Cor. 1:2). Paul taught that baptism signifies and expresses our **union** with Christ—by water and the Holy Spirit—and incorporates us into God’s redeemed humanity—‘one new humanity’ (Eph. 3:15).

We come into *union with Christ*, as God’s grace, mercy, and forgiveness, is revealed to us, **by the Holy Spirit**. The Spirit also cuts to, and inspires our hearts, imparts God’s righteousness, and evokes our thankfulness for God’s gifts of **faith** and **repentance** (Acts 11:18). Hope is awakened, love is shed abroad in our hearts (Romans 5:5), and ‘we love because he first loved us’ (1John 4:19). Love flows outward to humanity as our brothers and sisters (1John 4:21).

By the action of the Holy Spirit, we are joined with Christ **through faith**—taken up into Jesus Christ in his life, death, crucifixion, burial, resurrection, and ascended life. We are **united with Christ**, through the activity of God’s grace, and the human response of Christ’s faith, life, work, and his gospel (Romans 6:3-11; 2Cor. 5:14; John 17:20-21).

FAITH-WAY REPLACES LAW-WAY

¹⁹ For I through the law died to the law so that I might live for God ²⁰ **I have been crucified with Christ** and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. The life I now live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me. (Galatians 2:20, NIV).

‘*For through the law I died to the law...*’ (Gal. 2:19a) What does it mean? In his commentary on Galatians, Craig S. Keener notes that ‘*even the Galatians may not have caught all of the*

nuances of Paul's biblical interpretation' ... 'some of his arguments were probably lost on them—and us'! He says there are multiple ways of explanation,¹ and lists them. Here's one:

- “Perhaps Paul died to the law *through* the law because the law showed him his sinfulness and thereby that there was no salvation in the law itself; the law brought him death (as in Gal. 3:22; Rom. 7:5)”.

Commenting upon Galatians 2:19, Geoffrey Bingham says, definitively²:

The law slays me it does not bring to life. The law demands my death—and gets it! The law demands so high a moral life (nothing could be higher!) that when I see it I am cast down, doomed, slain. The law shows me I cannot attain it. I have to be dead to law or I am destroyed. **Law-way** cannot save me - it is impossible. Only **faith-way** can save me (cf. Romans 3:27-31). Law demands my death—and gets it! Paul undoubtedly remembers his 'death' when he sees Christ on the road to Damascus and realises his depth of sin (cf. Rom.7:9 - 'alive apart from the law once').

2:20 The last half of nineteen '**that I might live unto God**' is the clue for this verse. He cannot live unto God until slain by the law, and he is slain for this purpose. The law must do its work - it does. **Paul is crucified with Christ**. We must look at this clearly. This is not (primarily) a mystical experience. Christ's death is his. Not in *time is* he crucified with Christ, but in *accounting*. The death the law demanded Christ has died. Of course, this death strikes death to the hopes of law doing anything - and thank God it does - for that way is terrifyingly hopeless! It strikes death to human endeavour - works. But it satisfied the law, conscience and God. All fear of law is destroyed. Only the way of faith exists faith in the Son of God. Paul constantly lives in that faith - and so no going back to law - to eating with Jews only!

Law cannot reach out to grasp the mind. From now on it is a *faith-life*. Those who say that Paul means an inner moral crucifixion of the 'old nature' do not look to the context. Paul is referring to a **substitutionary sacrifice** - '*the Son of God who loved me and gave himself for me*'. It is a work for me on the cross that is accounted *to me*, and only in this sense can I say I have died with him; whilst undoubtedly there is a moral response - and whilst sin is struck at (self-effort, flesh-works, works-righteousness) and killed, yet not in a mystical but a psychological sense. Anyway *He loved me* - how can I then build the things again which I destroyed - go back to law. To Law? Away with the thought!

We are crucified with Christ, so that we might live in a **new way**. The Christian walking in new life, will at times face great opposition to this new life of hope. They will also find that the accusatory powers (Rev. 12:10) opposed to gospel freedom are relentless. The fact that we still sin, as believers, and still make poor decisions, means that we do need the ongoing receptivity to the work of Christ, the full forgiveness of our sins. We may know this but forget that it is really the case. This can lead to moods of depression, and of believers being deeply downcast (Psalm 42).

¹ Craig S. Keener, *Galatians: A Commentary*, Baker Academic, 2019, p. 193

² Geoffrey C. Bingham, *Galatians*, NCPI, 1982, p.16-17

It is difficult to over-estimate the value of rediscovering the matter co-crucifixion with Christ. For it is only God himself, acting for us, in the substitutionary atonement of Jesus, that makes propitiation (1John 2:2; 4:10) for our sins, averts God's wrath toward sinners (1Thessalonians 1:10; Romans 1:18; 4:15; 5:9;), justifies the ungodly (Romans 4:5), reconciles us while enemies to God (Romans 5:10-11), deals once and for all with the burning **guilt** which accompanies sin (Psalm 32:5; Isaiah 6:7), and thereby establishes us in peace. Jesus teaches us that the misery and prayer of the guilty sinful tax collector, 'be propitious to me a sinner' is answered by the God who alone justifies his people (Luke 18:13). There is an essay called: *'The Pastoral Power of Christ's Substitutionary Atonement'* which shows why this matter, when understood, can be so helpful to Christian people.³ Geoff Bingham writes:

'Once we have grasped that the co-dying passages are to do with the fulfilment of the **penalty** and the taking away of the guilt, then there is no difficulty in *reckoning* we have died and have come to life. It is legal death which gives us, so to speak, legal resurrection. Not that this is a mere figure of speech, for Christ has actually died, and actually risen!'⁴

In a 2017 book review on 'The Day the Revolution Began', Australian exegete Dr. Peter Adam noted that N. T. Wright—who is one of today's most influential, helpful scholars—has '*undermined by his constant critique... the traditional doctrine of the death of Christ as our substitute undergoing God's punishment for sin on behalf of sinners*'.⁵ In my view, to explore what it means to be 'crucified with Christ' can assist us all in our witness and proclamation, to be more nuanced, and 'under constant reform' and not dismissive of what is apostolic teaching, where genuine insights can be strengthened, and the importation into the church of unhelpful, even untrue caricatures of Jesus' ministry for us, can be dispelled.

Seeing our union with Jesus Christ in co-crucifixion, is a springboard for newness of life. We can with cleared conscience see Jesus' **incarnation** (God is with us), and in his **life** (battling temptation and the power of Satan), as well as in his **ministry of preaching, teaching, healing, prayer, kindness, and casting out demonic powers**, and then his triumph in the resurrection, ascension, present and his future reign in the age to come, enables us to see that we too are called to **newness of life** in him.

CO-CRUCIFIXION—AND LIVING FOR GOD

One of the reasons we were crucified with Christ Jesus is '*so that the body of sin might be destroyed and we might no longer be enslaved to sin*' (Romans 6:6). We become willing slaves of a new Master, Christ Jesus. In Jesus, we become 'slaves of righteousness' (Romans 6:18). 'For we are God's co-workers, working together; you are God's field, God's building' (1Cor. 3:9). If we think in terms of what the gospel practically does for a human being, we will be drawn to see that we are now free to actively participate in God's mandate for creation, to be fruitful in a myriad of ways that constitute our human vocation (Psalm 8; Genesis 1:28ff). This takes place now, with a view to an even richer participation in God's plan in the age to come.

³ Geoffrey C. Bingham, 'The Pastoral Power of Christ's Substitutionary Atonement', Pastor's Monday Study Group Notes, March 1989. See: <https://www.newcreationlibrary.org.au/studies/pdf/PSG1989.pdf>

⁴ Geoffrey C. Bingham, *Christ's Cross Over Man's Abyss*, NCPI, 1987, p. 165

⁵ <https://au.thegospelcoalition.org/article/n-t-wright-vs-straw-men-a-review-of-the-day-the-revolution-began/>

RESURRECTION UNION WITH CHRIST —AND ASCENSION UNION

Another of the reasons we were crucified with him is so that we might no longer fear death in the way that we once did. *'For if we have been **united** with him in a death like his, we will certainly be **united** with him in a resurrection like his* (Romans 6:5). It is this certainty of things hoped for, this *conviction of things not seen* (Hebrews 11:1ff.) that gave the apostles the enduring qualities needful for proclaiming the good news in the face of much affliction, difficulty, opposition and suffering.

Paul's certainty of **union with Jesus Christ**, and of Jesus' present place at the right hand of the Father, pressed him to proclaim that God has *'raised us up with him and **seated us with him** in the **heavenly places** in Christ Jesus'* (Ephesians 2:6).

And why was this done? *'So that in the ages to come he might show the immeasurable richness of his grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus'* (Ephesians 2:7). This is all the gift of God, 'not the result of works, so that no one may boast' (Ephesians 2:9).

Can we say with the apostle Paul, *'I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory about to be revealed to us'*? (Romans 8:18)

It is true that 'the whole creation has been groaning in labour pains until now'. This will not always be the case. The whole creation is unable to reach its appointed goal of glory apart from Christ's current Lordship, and reign, and his coming-appearing, and closing of this age — the planned **Telos**, or goal for creation, and opening of the age to come. Paul said that we 'groan inwardly' (Romans 8:23) as we wait for adoption, *the redemption of our bodies*.

UNION WITH GOD IN CHRIST—THEOSIS

In the goal of the Triune God, for creation, humanity is set to be in union with God, in our redeemed bodies of glory (1Cor. 15:24-28; Phil. 3:21), as *partakers of the Divine Nature*, or participants in the Divine Nature—as Peter has written (2Peter 1:4).

Theologians call this 'Theosis'. We shall not become God, but we shall know and share in the full union of the Father and Son and Spirit, in the way that God has ever intended, and planned in love before the foundation of the world, and Jesus' prayer for unity shall come to be (John 17:20-25; Revelation 21:3). We are shown John's vision of that the glorified creation, where nations are healed and reconciled to God and to one another in union with Christ (Rev. 22:2). This will be most beautiful. Our identity and sense of purpose will be wholly renewed, by the grace of God, and the Spirit's power. Angelic creatures will take up their part. God will be everything to everyone.

Those who love and practice falsehood shall not participate (Rev. 22:15).
Come, Lord Jesus!