

Series: Our Christian Identity

Sermon 3 (2/21/2016)

I Am United With Christ

Please go to Ephesians 1. As we have already seen, so many things are tied to our sense of identity. We're trying to trace these things through the Scriptures, and this morning we'll be starting in Ephesians 1 but also looking at some other texts.

In our day, one thing that has made identity a little more prominent is the threat of *identity theft*. We are so involved electronically, communicating details, transactions, and decisions, that there are many ways in which our identity, in a sense, can be stolen from us. I have had three different identity theft experiences (that I know of!). A few years ago, my credit card got charged for tickets to a Bon Jovi concert. It didn't take too long to convince the credit card people that that was not me, and so they were gracious to give me the money back. More recently, the state of South Carolina was hacked into, and some taxpayer information was leaked. I got a letter saying that my information was apparently in that batch, and they signed me up for a free protection service. As that was winding down, it turns out that my cell phone company got hacked! Again, a lot of information was stolen, and they signed me up for three years of an identity theft protection service. It's a pretty uncomfortable situation.

We are doing this series on identity because, as Christians, we can also suffer from *identity theft*. Not that anyone can actually take it away from us, but it happens this way: Either we impose on ourselves a wrong identity that then, practically, steals our true identity, or perhaps we let other people impose wrong identities on us that then confuse, demoralize, and throw us off. This series is kind of an identity protection service as far as our Christian identity is concerned. I hope that last week, you got some sense of how glorious our identity and calling as creatures in God's image are. And yet we understand that sin has stepped in and messed everything up. We have not lost the image of God, but it has been seriously damaged because of sin. Sin has incapacitated us so that we can not do fully what we were created to do. When it comes to that problem and we look at the gospel, what is it all about? In a sense, it is about restoring our identity. It's about enabling us to reflect the image of God and fully enjoy all the privileges that God intended for us, to pursue His glorious calling for us, exercise dominion over the world and enjoy all of His blessings. The plan of salvation has as one of its great goals to restore in us our identity as the image of God.

When we study the gospel, we realize more and more how complex, multifaceted, and comprehensive it is in terms of covering all the problems that sin has created and restoring the fulness of what God has intended for us. By His grace, God addresses every conceivable need that we have and gives us enjoyment of so many dimensions of what it means to be made in His image. We look at this package, called the gospel: in one sense, it is so simple a child can understand it, but also so complex that it takes the whole Bible to begin to explain its many sides. As we come to the writings of Paul, it is very helpful to look at this full package and see one core concept that serves to bring it all together. There is one "umbrella idea" that packages up all that God is doing to restore our identity. That is a truth that we do well to consider over and over again: our **union with Jesus Christ**. The great theologian T.D. Bernard put it this way: "Union with Christ is the fundamental idea which underlies the whole range of the epistles

and gives the specific character of their doctrine.”¹ That’s a pretty comprehensive statement, and maybe we don’t realize how important this is because of the way the New Testament develops it. You don’t find the phrase “union with Christ” everywhere. What you do find are these short expressions, very easy to skip over and miss their weightiness. Do you realize that 216 times in Paul’s writings alone, you find either the expression “in Christ” or something like it, such as “in Him”? This language is so pervasive; it is connected with so many different ideas that we have to look at it closely if we are to understand who we are and what God is doing in our lives.

In fact, another theologian (Hoekema) says, “Once you have had your eyes opened to this concept of union with Christ, you will find it almost everywhere in the New Testament.”² I want to illustrate that by reading from Ephesians 1:1-14. We could continue like that all the way through this book, but this makes the point of just how pervasive the theme is, even just in this one little section. Our salvation is constantly tied to being “in Christ, “in Him, “through Him.” Everything, in some way, falls underneath that umbrella. All the benefits of our redemption flow to us through our union with Christ. You may remember another statement of Paul that I’ve quoted the last two weeks, from I Corinthians 1:30. In this verse, the word “wisdom” seems to refer to the overall plan of God, His skill in working on our behalf to deliver us. We have three different dimensions of that plan, all of them “in Christ:” our righteousness (our standing of full acceptance before Him), our sanctification, which would include the ongoing process by which the image of God is being restored, and our redemption, which has to do with our deliverance from the bondage of sin. Paul tells us in Romans 8 that our redemption even includes our whole body. Our standing, sanctification, and glorification—redemption from the effects of sin—are happening because we are in Christ. That’s why John Murray wrote this: Union with Christ “is not simply a step in the application of redemption; when viewed, according to the teaching of Scripture, in its broader aspects it underlies every step of the application of redemption. Union with Christ is really the central truth of the whole doctrine of salvation not only in its application but also in its once-for-all accomplishment in the finished work of Christ.” Our identity theme today is the truth that we are *united with Christ*.

This is another fundamental truth with far-reaching implications. This is what it means to be a Christian. Obviously, with so many things tied to it, we can’t cover all of it in one sermon, but we don’t need to! All of the other points we will look at in the coming weeks are part of it; they flow out of this one basic truth about us. In one way or another, all the sermons that are left will expound the ramifications of our being in Christ. Today, I would like to survey the concept as it’s taught in the New Testament. We’ll do that under three headings, three dimensions of our union with Christ: our *positional* dimension, our *vital* dimension, and our *corporate* dimension.

Let’s look at the positional dimension. This refers to our official status, our standing as human beings before God in His role as our Creator, Owner, and Judge. In reality, every human has some kind of identity tied to somebody else. We are talking about being in Christ, but before we were in Christ, every human being was in Adam. That statement, “in Adam,” summarizes the status that all humans naturally have. God structured the whole human race so that what Adam did affected all of us. We come into the world in Adam, influenced profoundly by the effects of Adam’s choices. Someone might say that doesn’t sound very fair. Why can’t I have my own personal identity and represent myself before God? Maybe it

¹ T.D. Bernard, *Progress*, 177

² A. Hoekema, *Saved*, 64

will help us to understand that all sorts of things in life work this way. Once I got married, for example, the effects of my choices were no longer limited to me. As God has set up marriage, the husband is the head of the home and his actions have an impact on his wife. The same is true once we have children. What is taught in the home, its direction, etc. are largely determined by one person, and those choices have a profound impact on everyone else in the family. It works the same way on a sports team—there are coaches and a team captain, and their decisions affect everyone, whether or not they like it. If you think they made a bad call, it's tough luck. That's the nature of being part of the group. Of course, we are learning that the same thing applies in terms of government. The people elected by the majority go into their position, and whether or not we like it, the way things are structured, that individual's choices (going to war, passing laws) affect us. That's the way God, in His infinite wisdom, chose to set up the human race. Adam would be the head of this race, and as far as sin, life, and death are concerned, so much of what he did was passed on to the rest of us. In Romans 5:12-14, this truth is developed. The point is that when Adam failed, no matter what happened with the later generations, they were born and counted as sinners doomed to die because of what Adam did.

But here is the corresponding great truth: You don't have to stay in Adam! If you don't like it that his sin had these devastating consequences for you, you have an alternative. You may be in Christ, and that totally undoes what Adam did that affected you so profoundly. Romans 5:15-17 develops Paul's wonderful teaching about justification. Christ's righteousness and death lead to the justification of all who are in Him. All of His achievements on earth are charged to our account, and we are no longer held to the requirement that we offer to Him perfect obedience to receive life. If you are trusting in Christ as your representative, He has attained it for you. All the benefits He earned through His life are credited to you. You are no longer liable for the penalty of sin, infinite death under the wrath of God. If you are in Christ, your representative has already undergone that penalty and what He accomplished is counted to work successfully in your place. This is the great doctrine of justification, one of the benefits of our positional connection with the Lord Jesus Christ.

As glorious as that truth is, it doesn't stop there. We come to chapter 6 of Romans and we find phrases that describe what we were before being in Christ, before our conversion, when we were still in Adam. We were under the dominion of sin, "slaves" to sin. Not only were we condemned because of Adam, but we were subjected to the authority of sin as our master. Even if we wanted to stop sinning and tried to live up to God's standards, we would find it impossible. We are under the cruel bondage of sin. That was our position: enslaved to sin. One of the great transactions that takes place when we are moved from being "in Adam" to "in Christ" is that we are baptized into Christ Jesus, buried, and raised up with Him to a new kind of life. What does that mean? That everything He achieved on the cross, including—practically speaking—the conquest of sin as a ruling authority—has been applied to us as well. That doesn't mean that we no longer have tendencies to sin, that we won't find it appealing, or that we won't commit particular acts of sin. It means that our master-slave relationship to sin has been, once and for all, terminated. We no longer *have* to sin. We have the alternative, the authority to resist the encroachment of sin. It no longer has any legal claim on us. When we choose to sin, we are voluntarily choosing to submit to a deposed tyrant. It would be like, following an election, someone continuing to pay attention to the decrees of the former president, someone acting as though he were still in power and looking to him to sign laws and declare war or peace. He is out of place, no longer in that position. You can follow him if you want to, but the folly of that may help us see just how foolish it is to

voluntarily submit to sin now that it is no longer our master. One of the great privileges of our positional union with Christ is that sin's authority over us has been snapped.

Union with Christ not only detaches us from sin's authority, but there is another side to it. As beautiful as the truths are about our legal position, it is not limited to that. With the second dimension of our union with Christ, here is what is happening: It is much more personal; we are united with Christ so intimately, joined in such a personal way, that experientially, His life and vitality flow to me, in my heart and inner man, and gives me strength. This is the *vital*, or life-giving, dimension of our union. Here's an illustration: We are familiar with life support systems, when a person on his deathbed is hooked up to a machine that for all practical purposes is keeping him alive. Something like that is going on here, but it looks like this (although I'm not sure this can be done!): You're not hooked up to a machine artificially keeping you breathing, but it's more like being hooked up to another human being. When you are in poor health, if there were a way to get hooked up through a cable or something to someone else's heart, and that life were transferred to you to keep you alive. This is bizarre, but maybe you could picture it this way: It would actually be more like that person could be put *inside* me. That is closer to the Bible's teaching about this dimension. We know about heart transplants; maybe that is easier to understand. It's like a whole other person is transplanted inside me, and from within his life continues to keep me alive. It sounds strange, but actually that is the way the Bible describes our vital union with Christ.

Galatians 2:20 says that Christ lives "in me." Spiritually speaking, He is the one pumping life into me. I didn't create this and I cannot sustain it. It requires supernatural energy. Colossians 1:27 says the same thing, Christ "in you." Jesus even gives us His own metaphor. In John 15, He gives the analogy of a vine and its branches. From the central trunk of the plant, the life moves from the soil to the organically connected branches, leaves, and fruit. That is like the vital union with Christ. How does that work? We understand from the gospels that Jesus physically was raised from the dead, and in Acts we see that in that same body He went back to heaven. In a sense, although Christ as a member of the Godhead is omnipresent, in terms of His direct presence, He is still localized to a body. We will see Him come back, but it is hard to understand Christ, in His physical state, somehow inside me. How is He "in us" but also in heaven, in His glorified body?

This is the great truth of the work of the Holy Spirit. Remember what Jesus taught in John in the upper room discourse: that it was actually to the benefit of the disciples that He would go to heaven, because somebody in a body can only be physically present in one location. When He gets to heaven, His presence will be mediated to them through the third person of the Godhead, the Spirit. In the new covenant, He will perform a new level of ministry and be Jesus' personal representative, going into all the world, poured out from heaven and taking up residence inside the people of God. Right before he talked about the vine and the branches, in John 14:16-17, Jesus said that His Spirit would be inside them, playing a new role once He ascended to heaven and poured Him out to carry out that ministry. Through the personal ministry of the Holy Spirit within the body of every Christian, this vital union with Christ happens. There are many practical ramifications.

Here is a negative one: Paul gives us a warning when he teaches us in I Corinthians 6:19-20 the connection between our union with Christ and acts of sin (especially the immorality under discussion in that passage). He says our union with Christ is so intimate and unbreakable that when we sin, we are taking Jesus, through the Holy Spirit, with us. Our body belongs to Him and is His residence; when we

sin, He does not close His eyes or disappear! He is there inside us. I don't want to be crass, but in this passage he is saying that you take the Holy Spirit "to bed" with you. One of the things about immorality that make it such a grievous offense in the New Testament is that our body is the temple of the Spirit, where He lives. That thought should be horrifying to the Christian. Let it be a warning—apply the doctrine of union of Christ to those negative things.

On the positive side, here is a great blessing of this dimension: Since He lives within us through the Holy Spirit and has conquered sin; since nothing can ultimately resist His power, when we are united with Christ, we are taking with us all the power needed to resist sin. It's not just legal; in our body we practically carry around the resources we need to resist sin. The Holy Spirit can minister to you the energy you need. In Romans 8:12-14, we see that the power of the Spirit is within us, available to us at all times, so that we can actually kill specific temptations and resist specific acts of sin to which we are drawn.

Third, there is the *corporate* dimension. When we are united with Christ, we are also united with everyone else that is united with Christ. We're all in this—in a very real, meaningful way—together. This is what Jesus was praying about in John 17:21-23. There are a lot of prepositions and phrasing there, but Christ and the Father are one. We are joined to the Godhead, and everyone else joined to it is packaged together. I am united with everyone else united to Him. Here's another illustration: think of the spokes of a wheel. Even though they are individual pieces, they are all attached to one hub. In that sense, they are connected to each other and functioning together. They will fall apart and you will end up on the ground if somehow one of the spokes on your bike pulls out of the hub! We're all connected, united to the hub and to each other. The Bible gives its own analogy, that of the body. For example, in Ephesians 4, Paul talks about the church speaking the truth in love, growing up into Christ. You can hardly get more real and intimate than to think of a single body with Christ as the head. The rest of the body is connected to Him; the little finger, elbow, chest, ears, toes, everything is one package, drawn together into one body because we are all connected to the same Head.

I won't develop that further now, because one of the points of our identity is that I am *communal*. This survey is enough to highlight that our identity is interwoven with our brothers and sisters in Christ. We do not live strictly as individuals. In a spiritual but very real way, I am joined to you, you are joined to me, and that has implications for how I live my life.

Positional, vital, and corporate union with Christ: all of those have radical implications for how I think about myself, my actions, my relationships. As we close, let me share three implications. When you package everything together, there is an impact on your fundamental attitude toward life. How does union with Christ shape my attitude? Here is how it should: I should go through life confident, not defeated in my mentality. If all these things are true about me, I recognize my weakness, repent of my sin, am humble, but I don't stop there. The role of my union with Christ is to persuade me that because of His enabling and presence, I have the power and ability to live for God. I have hope, confidence, courage, not because of me but because He is residing in me.

As it relates to my values—what is really important to me, what I love, what my affections are—they are, in a word, heavenly, not earthly. Isn't this how Paul applies this idea in Colossians 3? He says that we will seek the things that are above if our identity is tied to Him. How can your life be primarily about earthly things, and at all about sinful things? That's how union with Christ affects my values.

Third, as it relates to my choices: it moves me toward righteousness and away from sin. I do view Christ as my Lord now; I'm in this new realm. Not just in my heart, but in my concrete actions, I submit to my new Master and not my old one. As we close, I want to read to you some more along these lines. This week at the Bob Jones University Bible Conference, some of us heard about some of these very things over and over again. One of the speakers was a former teacher of mine, Dr. Michael Barrett. I heard him three times, and he said the same things I heard him say over and over again for years in college and graduate school! Those truths are just kind of the background of my mind and heart, having been drilled into me so much. By the grace of God, it really is just the way I think about the Christian life. I'd like to read something he wrote about union with Christ. He begins this chapter by reflecting on his youth, how he was a "nerd" going through school. One time, he tried to stand up to a bully, and he says "I remember quite an adrenaline rush, as several busloads of students formed a ring around us outside the school to witness the bully's getting what everyone knew he deserved. As I recall, I caused significant damage to his knuckles when his punch followed through to my teeth after fattening my lip." And so he chose a smarter way of going about this: he decided he was going to befriend some of the big athletes at the school. "Notwithstanding my personal weakness, I felt fairly safe when I stuck with the big boys. Even when the bullies were around, my security was in my associations. When I was a kid, my safety and acceptance among my peers depended on my association with the popular athletes. Infinitely more importantly, the believer's security and acceptance with God depend on his association, indeed his union, with Jesus Christ. This is mind-boggling, when we realize that in Christ dwells all the fulness of the Godhead bodily, and that believers are complete in Him. Tragically, too many Christians who are in fact united to Christ do not consciously and deliberately take advantage of what that union means and guarantees for a happy Christian life. As a result, these Christians struggle with doubt, intimidation, and fear, facing the issues of life and death as though they were alone. Moving ahead, would to God that every one of us who knows the Lord Jesus as his Savior would learn to live in the reality of our union to Him. If only we would realize that, regardless of our personal failures, imperfections, and sins, the merit of Jesus Christ encompasses and subsumes all of our service to Him." He goes on to say that "fixing our minds on the amazing truth of our union to Christ profoundly impacts the way we live. It gives us boldness and motivation for life and confidence for death. As we learn to take advantage of all that we are and have in Christ, we will experience all the benefits of our completeness in him. I think that one of the greatest advantages that union in Christ provides us is the profound sense of assurance and security flowing from the knowledge that God deals with us only and always in terms of Christ. What is true about Christ is true for those in Christ."³

So, are you in Christ? If not, get in Christ! Yield your heart to Him. Plead with Him that all of these benefits would be applied to your Christ. And if that is true of you, let us be confident; let us have peace. Let us be assured, secure in our identity, not because I as an individual am special, but because I am connected with Someone who is divine—the Son of God.

³ Michael Barrett, *Complete in Him*, 93-95