

United with Christ Means: New Life Romans 6:3-4

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Two weeks ago, between services, I was in the Commons greeting folks and a family came up to me. It was their first Sunday. "I'm Pastor Steve, what is your name?"

"Hi, we are the Romans family."

"Oh! The Romans. What a great time to start coming to our church!" We are studying Romans. They were very nice people and I hope they come back.

In a way, we are all Romans for this series as we are going deep in this letter from the Apostle Paul to the church at Rome and to us. We are now in chapter 6. This wonderful chapter transitions from five chapters explaining the necessity of salvation from God's wrath at our sin through justification by faith to explaining the radical and wonderful change this new life in Christ produces. Chapters 6-8 deal with the change in our slavery to our ancient enemy sin. The big point is that salvation is both salvation from the penalty of sin (justification) and salvation from the mastery of sin over us (sanctification). Sin is no longer the dominant identity of our lives. Through Christ we are part of the reign of grace and what Paul is going to call today newness of life.

Even this little summary begs a question. Perhaps this is something you have wondered about the claims of Christianity, even if you grant the reality of Jesus being the Son of God who died on the cross for sin. And if you also grant Christianity's central claim and miracle, the resurrection from the dead. It still begs the question, how can those works of Jesus be connected in a redemption 2,000 years later? How can what Jesus did be applied to my soul in a way that makes any difference at all?

"What shall we say then? Are we to continue in sin that grace may abound? By no means! How can we who died to sin still live in it? Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? We were buried therefore with him by baptism into death, in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life. For if we have been united with him in a death like his, we shall certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his." (Romans 6:1-5, ESV)

As we have already seen, Paul is addressing the charge that salvation by grace is permission to sin. He asks, *how can we continue in sin when we died to sin?* What? I died to sin? I don't remember dying to sin. If we were honest even as Christians, sin seems to be very much alive and well as we continue to sin.

Paul senses we need a tangible illustration. Where does he go? Baptism. *"Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death?"* (Romans 6:3) Paul builds a bridge of understanding by saying, *"Do you not know?"* We might say it, *hey we all know such and such* and the assumption is that there is a point of agreement and understanding regarding the purpose of baptism.

We see here that in the early church there was a universal understanding of the purpose of baptism. Remember Paul is writing to a church in a city that he's never visited. He had never taught them about baptism or its meaning. But he didn't have to because baptism

was part of the core teachings that all Christians held to.¹ Further, Paul assumes all of them not only know the meaning of baptism, but they have been personally baptized. You didn't have non-baptized Christians running around the early church. Baptism was so central to the basic message of Christianity that Phillip shares the gospel with the Ethiopian eunuch and they come to a body of water along the road and the eunuch asks, *what keeps me from being baptized?* Even Phillip's brief chariot ride gospel explanation to the eunuch included baptism as part of what it meant to become a Christian.

Paul is so confident they understand, that he uses baptism in this illustration freely as a symbol of saving faith. He isn't worried that anyone would think he meant baptism saves us. Look, "*We were buried therefore with him by baptism into death.*" (Romans 6:4) There are denominations that read this verse in isolation and conclude that baptism is the means by which we are united with Christ. This is known as baptismal regeneration, and those who hold to this say that unless you are baptized you can't be saved. See here it says, "*we were buried therefore with him by baptism.*" It couldn't be any clearer, baptism is the link between us and Jesus and his cross. Yes, you could think that, but you would be wrong. Why? Paul has just spent five chapters explaining the gospel is justification by faith not by baptism. The whole testimony of the New Testament is salvation by faith in Jesus, not by baptism in Jesus. What is going on here in Romans 6?

I heard John Piper explain this brilliantly and I'll just share his illustration. When someone is married, they exchange rings. As they put the ring in the ceremony they often say, *with this ring I thee wed*. If that was all you heard in the ceremony you could think, ah, what unites a husband and wife in marriage? The ring. Wearing the ring makes you married. Of course, that would be silly. What unites a marriage are the conventional vows earlier in the ceremony. Since everybody understands that, we can say about the ring, *with this ring I thee wed* and only the child might misunderstand. The ring is a visual symbol of mutual commitment. The ring signifies the covenant of marriage without itself securing it. Like the ring, baptism signifies salvation without securing salvation.² It's the ring of the gospel.

So why bring up baptism to explain our death to sin? ***Because baptism symbolizes in water what has happened to us in Christ.*** We know this because of what is hinted at in verse 3 and made clear in verse 5. *We are baptized into Christ Jesus.* Then verse 5, "*For if we have been united with him.*"

What are these talking about? Baptized into Jesus? United with Jesus? It's talking about what I am going to suggest is the most important doctrine you've likely never heard of.

There is a restaurant near New Buffalo, Michigan that is like this doctrine. You go there and it's packed all the time. With who? Locals. It's like a big secret people don't want to let get out. It's already hard enough to get a seat. Word gets out, forget about it. If I told you the name, you've probably never heard of it. It's not a well-known New Buffalo restaurant. But it's the best food. So good. So wonderful. And no matter what you offer me after the service, I'm not telling you what it is. If I have taken you there, you are also sworn to secrecy.

This doctrine is like that restaurant. It's amazingly wonderful, but few Christians know about it. Unlike the restaurant, if you are a Christian you've already dined on this doctrine. You have personally been incredibly blessed by it. What is it?

¹ John Piper, "United with Christ in Death and Life, Part 2," October 1, 2000.²

² See John Stott, *The Message of Romans: God's Good News for the World*, p. 173.

Union with Christ

Eminent theologian John Murray calls it, "*the central truth of the whole doctrine of salvation.*"³ That's a big statement, but when we understand what union with Christ means we will likely agree.

It is a work of the Holy Spirit

"*For in one Spirit we were all baptized into one body—Jews or Greeks, slaves or free—and all were made to drink of one Spirit.*" (1 Corinthians 12:13) This union is a spiritual union with Jesus accomplished by the Holy Spirit in which Jesus' works are done for us and with us.

"In Christ" is shorthand for union with Christ

There is a very common shorthand for union with Christ in the New Testament. *In Christ*. When you see "in Christ" you should read that as "in union with Christ." This is all over.

- "*To the church of God that is in Corinth, to those sanctified in Christ Jesus.*" (1 Corinthians 1:2, emphasis added)
- "*To the saints and faithful brothers in Christ at Colossae: Grace to you and peace from God our Father.*" (Colossians 1:2, emphasis added)
- "*Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places, even as he chose us in him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and blameless before him.... In him we have redemption through his blood.... In him we have obtained an inheritance.... In him you also, when you heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation, and believed in him, were sealed with the promised Holy Spirit.*" (Ephesians 1:3–4, 7, 11, 13, emphasis added)

In him, in Christ. All over the place.

Union with Christ - *What was True of Jesus is True of Us*

What is union with Christ? Here is David Needham's definition, "*What was true for Jesus is true of us.*"⁴ The first union is Jesus with us. The incarnation was Jesus unifying with humanity by becoming human. So, Jesus united with us in the incarnation. In salvation, we unite with him.

This is salvation glue in which God joins us spiritually to the works of Jesus. When he died to sin, so did we. When he was buried in complete death, we were completely dead with him. When he was resurrected, in the eyes of God, we were resurrected too. Everything that was true of Jesus is true of us.

This is the answer to the question, how can some guy who died on some cross reportedly for sin be connected to me 2,000 years later? God answers it with, union with Christ.

³ John Murray, *Redemption Accomplished and Applied*, p. 170.

⁴ David Needham, *Alive for the First Time*, p. 205

You likely have celebrated this union, but never thought about it. We sing, "*Jesus paid it all, all to him I owe.*"⁵ How did Jesus die for sins not yet committed by sinners who didn't yet exist? When Christ died, God united our sin with his sacrifice. God doing something to save us before we even existed might be a path to accepting the doctrine of election for you. But that's chapter 9; we are in chapter 6. Where is union with Christ here?

"Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death?" (Romans 6:3)

"For if we have been united with him in a death like his, we shall certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his..." (Romans 6:5)

Baptized into Christ, united with Christ. Both speak of the same thing. Christians are in union with Christ. Paul responds to the charge that grace is permission from God to sin by saying, *you died to sin*. Really? When? You died to sin when Jesus died for sin. The sovereign God united your sinfulness to Jesus such that when Jesus died to sin, so did you. He doesn't stop there. Paul connects the three key aspects of Jesus' work on our behalf to our ongoing relationship to sin. Death. Burial. Resurrection.

- *"Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? We were buried therefore with him by baptism into death, in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life."* (Romans 6:3-4, emphasis added)

When Jesus died to sin, we died to sin. When Jesus was buried, we were buried with him. When Jesus rose again, we rose again with him in the sense that his resurrected life is the same life God gives to us at salvation. This explains two famous verses:

- *"Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come."* (2 Corinthians 5:17)
- *"I have been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me."* (Galatians 2:20)

I was crucified with Jesus? Spiritually? Yes. The spiritual life within me is Christ living in me by the Holy Spirit such that I'm essentially a new creation. A new person. The old enslaved-to-sin-me is gone. The new has come. New life!

These verses are a key pivot point in all of Romans as Paul explains how justification by faith and union with Christ produces in the Christian not a better life or self-improved life but a resurrected life. *Newness of life*. This new life is dead to sin. Sin is no longer our master. I'm not looking at grace as an excuse to sin. I'm looking at Jesus as a great reason not to sin. What flows in chapters 6-8 is Paul's glorious explanation of what newness of life looks like. It's our transformation from the old life to the new life of God's grace, love, power, and life.

Newness of life and eternal life are the same life. It's eternal in that it's unending. But don't think for a moment it's merely our future life. There is present in every Christian now the very resurrected life of Christ. How can this transform us? To say saving grace is permission

⁵ Elvina M. Hall, "Jesus Paid it All," 1865.

to sin is to completely ignore and seek to exploit my union with Jesus. Such a preposterous abuse of grace means you really don't understand saving grace in the first place.

David Needham points out that this newness of life is so fully our new identity that the only thing about union with Jesus still missing is glorification. Paul addresses this in 6:5, *"For if we have been united with him in a death like his, we shall certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his."* (Romans 6:5) Future tense. Someday our bodies will be resurrected and glorified like Jesus. Union with Christ is a forever reality. Romans 8 says we are co-heirs with Christ. What Jesus inherits from the Father we inherit too! Death. Burial. Resurrection. Rule and reign. Life forever. Co-heirs with the Son of God? How is this possible for sinners? Union with Christ. This is the best doctrine you've never heard of, am I right?

Three Illustrations of Union with Christ

Climbing Tether

I'm just going to draw on an illustration that I've already been using here in Romans. A few weeks ago I had ropes hanging from the ceiling to illustrate that we were in Adam but now we are tethered to Jesus. We are carabinered to Jesus. Just imagine saving faith as being clipped in to Jesus' carabiner. I'm now connected to Jesus. This is what faith is. But the result is what Paul is talking about here is union with Christ. So that now in the eyes of God, because I'm carabinered to Jesus, when he died on the cross, I died with him. When Jesus was dead in the grave, I was dead with him. When he was resurrected, I was resurrected with him. I am entirely bound up with the saving works of Jesus because I am in union with Christ. I am tethered to him. That's the first illustration.

Marriage

God loves pictures. It helps us so much to understand spiritual truth. He's filled the world with little pictures of himself. We have many married couples here. By God's design, marriage is a picture of our union with Christ. We go to Ephesians 5 and Paul is explaining the role of the husband and the role of the wife, and then he says this, *"This mystery is profound, and I am saying that it refers to Christ and the church."* (Ephesians 5:32) You think Paul is talking about marriage, but then you find out he's actually talking about the relationship between Christ and the church. Christ and us.

So, what is marriage? Marriage is the union between two very different people. The two have become one. We find out that marriage is designed by God to help us understand what it means to be in union with Jesus.

In marriage, what's true for the husband is true for the wife. One spouse gets a raise at work, we got a raise. The wife gives birth, we had a child. When you are married, it's no longer me and you, it's us. You and you are a "we." It's a picture of our union with Christ. That's the second illustration.

Symphony

The final illustration starts by looking at the Greek for *united* in verse 5. That word is the root of our word "symphony." We are symphonic with Jesus. This reminded me of an experience I had a few years ago. The Northwest Indiana Symphony invited me to be the narrator for *Peter and the Wolf*. It's a musical story about a boy named Peter and a wolf. Shocker. Now I've attended various symphony performances over the years and always

enjoyed them. But this experience I'll never forget. To be the narrator meant I was not near the symphony or in the audience of the symphony, I was in the symphony. They seated me right next to the conductor. First chair violin was to my right. Surrounding me were all the instruments. I'm here to tell you there is a big difference between being near the symphony and being in the symphony. I said afterwards that they should sell seating amid the symphony, the experience was that great. Why? I wasn't merely listening to the music, I was in the music.

Union with Christ is like that. So many people get near to Christianity. They can enjoy it to an extent. Going to church is great. Some moral teaching is helpful. Good advice for marriage and parenting. Jesus is a compelling person to study and get to know. These people are *near* Christ but not *in* Christ. They are *around* Christ, but not *in union* with him. New life is only for those who are in symphony with Christ. This happens when we repent of our sin and turn to Jesus.

I conclude by holding out a restaurant you've not yet discovered, a ring you need to put on, a tether to Jesus that saves you. Don't attend the symphony, join it. And all that was, is, and true of Christ will be true for you as well.

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