

THE CHRISTIAN'S IDENTITY IN CHRIST:
A FRAMEWORK FOR PASTORAL MINISTRY

by

PAUL D. HAMILTON

B.A., University of North Carolina at Charlotte, 1998

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ABSTRACT

This paper argues that the Apostle Paul's doctrine of Union with Christ is so central to the Christian's identity that, when rightly understood, it provides an excellent framework for the pastoral ministry. First, this paper demonstrates the centrality of union with Christ to Paul's theology by showing the primary place in which Paul placed union with Christ in redemptive history, discussing the federal headship of Adam and Christ and explaining the transition from being under the Law to being in Christ. Second, the scope of union with Christ in Paul's theology is discussed showing that the totality of the Christian's identity is impacted through his union with Christ, in that the old identity dies with Christ and a new identity lives in Christ. Third, the framework of Paul's doctrine of the Christian's identity in Christ is applied to the pastoral ministry. This framework is presented as a help for pastors to keep Christ at the center of every aspect of their work.

To Kristy, the best of all the earthly blessings God has brought into my life.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

The Apostle Paul considered union with Christ more valuable than anything else in his life. He wrote, “I have suffered the loss of all things, and count them as rubbish so that I may gain Christ, and may be found in him . . .” (Phil. 3:8-9).¹ Union with Christ is so central to the identity of the believer that Paul later wrote, “You have died and your life is hidden with Christ in God” (Col. 3:3). The entire identity of the believer is “hidden with Christ.” Nothing is more valuable than gaining Christ, and when he is gained, nothing impacts the identity of the individual more. Wayne Grudem’s definition of union with Christ highlighted this essential nature of union with Christ to the Christian’s experience. He wrote:

Union with Christ is a phrase used to summarize several different relationships between believers and Christ, through which Christians receive every benefit of salvation. These relationships include the fact that we are in Christ, Christ is in us, we are like Christ, and we are with Christ.²

For the Christian, this fully orbed union with Christ is the center of his identity.

John Murray was so convinced of the importance of union with Christ that he wrote, “Nothing is more central or basic than union and communion with Christ.”³ Calvin

¹ All Scripture taken from the NEW AMERICAN STANDARD BIBLE, Copyright 1960, 1962, 1963, 1968, 1971, 1972, 1973, 1975, 1977, 1995 by the Lockman Foundation. Used by permission.

² Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1994), 841.

³ John Murray, *Redemption Accomplished and Applied* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1955), 161.

understood that apart from union with Christ there could be no access to the blessings of Christ; in fact, if anyone is separated from Christ, all that Christ accomplished through his life and death are “useless and of no value.”⁴ Calvin later added:

That indwelling of Christ in our hearts—in short, that mystical union—are accorded by us the highest degree of importance, so that Christ, having been made ours, makes us sharers with him in the gifts with which he has been endowed.⁵

The importance of this union cannot be overstated as all the blessings and value of the Christian life are accessible only through this vital connection to Jesus Christ. While this doctrine is taught throughout the New Testament Scriptures, nowhere is it developed more than in the various letters of the Apostle Paul.

The Apostle Paul’s letters⁶ were written to real Christians and real churches with real sins, weaknesses and failures. Paul did not write about union with Christ in a theological vacuum but always with the aim of pastoral application. The purpose and interest of this paper is to demonstrate that Paul wrote about union with Christ as completely recreating and rejuvenating the Christian’s identity and that Paul’s model for pastoral ministry addresses the Christian based on this new identity. That is not to say that union with Christ is the most important doctrine in the Christian faith or even the most important aspect of the Christian ministry. However, because it is the entry point of every Christian into the faith and the connection through which every benefit of that faith is brought into the experience of the

⁴ John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. McNeill, John, trans. Ford Lewis Battles (Louisville, London: Westminster John Knox Press, 1960), 1:537.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 1:737

⁶ This paper assumes the Pauline authorship of the 13 New Testament books that have been traditionally ascribed to him.

Christian, union with Christ is foundational to the Christian life and to the pastor seeking to guide the Christian in that life.

It is not the purpose of this paper to detail how an individual is brought into union with Christ, though that is occasionally touched on. Neither is it the purpose of this paper to identify and define every possible aspect of union with Christ. The purpose of this paper is to examine how a Christian's being "in Christ" radically impacts the individual's identity and to form a pastoral model based on the Christian's new identity in Christ.

Before embarking on this expedition into the Christian's identity in Christ, there are a few introductory matters to consider. First, "Union with Christ does not obscure the distinction between Christ and the believer united to him."⁷ It would be misunderstanding the biblical material presented in this paper to make the leap from being in Christ, to becoming Christ, or merging with the essence of Christ—that is, becoming the essence of God. Calvin, refuting the teachings of a contemporary of his named Andreas Osiander, argued that blending the essence of the Christian with Christ confused the source of the Christian's righteousness. The Christian, he argued, was not justified by becoming the righteousness of the eternal God, but by receiving the righteousness Christ earned on the cross.⁸ As Marc Garcia rightly noted, "'Imputation,' properly understood, safeguards this distinction"⁹ between Christ and the believer. This distinction is treated as a presupposition for this paper; missing this distinction would be to misunderstand the basic tenants of the paper.

⁷ Mark A. Garcia, "Imputation and the Christology of Union with Christ: Calvin, Osiander, and the Contemporary Quest for a Reformed Model," *Westminster Theological Journal* 68 (2006): 219–20.

⁸ Calvin, 1:730.

⁹ Garcia, 220.

Second, the concept of personal identity is a major theme throughout this paper. Humans may have many layers to their identities. Some are superficial and easily changed; for example, someone who identifies himself with a particular sports team may become disheartened by another losing season and switch his allegiance to a better team. Other identities are deeply rooted in a person's sense of self, such as one's gender. Identity in this paper is not a reference to a peripheral way of seeing oneself. Instead, identity is used here to describe the most basic and fundamental aspect of the being of the individual. It describes at the deepest level who the individual is. This paper considers how being in Christ impacts the Christian's identity to such a deep level that it cannot be changed by the individual; it can only be explored and more fully understood.

Third, a historical note: generally speaking, the doctrine of union with Christ has received more emphasis since the time of the reformation. The early church fathers did not seem to have explored the doctrine in great detail.¹⁰ John Chrysostom, for example, in his homilies on Ephesians almost skipped over the "in Christ" phrases, writing only that "this blessing was . . . by Christ Jesus."¹¹ About Paul's use of 'in Christ' in 1 Corinthians 1:30, he only wrote, "It is not this man or that who hath made us wise, but Christ"¹² While

¹⁰ This paper is not discussing or dealing with the mystical teaching of Theosis which is found earlier in some parts of the early Christian church.

¹¹ John Chrysostom, *Homilies of St. John Chrysostom, Archbishop of Constantinople, on the Epistle of St. Paul the Apostle to the Ephesians*. In *Saint Chrysostom: Homilies on Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, Thessalonians, Timothy, Titus, and Philemon*, trans. Gross Alexander, A Select Library of the Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church, First Series, edited by Philip Schaff, 13 (New York: Christian Literature Company, 1889), 51.

¹² John Chrysostom, *Homilies of St. John Chrysostom, Archbishop of Constantinople, on the First Epistle of St. Paul the Apostle to the Corinthians*, trans. Chambers, Talbot, A Select Library of the Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church, First Series, edited by Philip Schaff, 12 (New York: Christian Literature Company, 1889), 25.

certainly true, Chrysostom did not develop the topic further. Perhaps this doctrine was not at the forefront of their thinking because the church fathers were focused on combating heresies surrounding such issues as the divinity and humanity of Christ and the nature of the Trinity. Calvin, on the other hand, as already noted, accorded the doctrine a much more prominent place in his theology.

Following Calvin, the doctrine of union with Christ has continued to impact the thinking of the protestant church. Tudur Jones wrote of the Calvinistic Puritans of the 16th and 17th centuries that “both the experience and the doctrine of union with Christ was [*sic*] fundamental to their Christianity.”¹³ In recent years there have been a growing number books and articles written on union with Christ and it is increasing in popularity. While this doctrine has only been clearly emphasized for the past 500 years, this paper will demonstrate that union with Christ and its impact on the Christian’s identity is central to Paul’s theology.

With these introductory matters out of the way, this paper will now address its primary topic: a pastoral model based on Paul’s application of union with Christ to the Christian’s identity. In the following pages this topic will be explored from various perspectives. Chapter Two observes the Christian’s identity in Christ in the broad context of redemptive history, showing how Paul places union with Christ at the center of God’s plan of salvation and roots the Christian’s identity in God’s eternal plan. Chapter Three demonstrates the scope of union with Christ as the entire Trinity is involved in totally altering the identity of the converted sinner. Chapter Four focuses on the pastor’s application

¹³ R. Tudur Jones, “Union with Christ: The Existential Nerve of Puritan Piety,” *Tyndale Bulletin* 41, no. 2 (1990): 208.

of the Christian's identity in Christ in his own life, in the lives of the believers under his care and in the life of the church as a whole.

CHAPTER 2

THE CHRISTIAN'S IDENTITY IN CHRIST: THE PLACE IN REDEMPTIVE HISTORY

The Apostle Paul presented the doctrine of union with Christ and its application from within the context of his place in redemptive history. From his standpoint after the inauguration of the New Covenant (i.e., after the death, burial and resurrection of Jesus), he was in a position to look back over the entire scope of redemptive history and see how all of God's work of salvation had always been ultimately related to Jesus Christ's work on the cross. Paul reinterpreted the Old Testament through the lens of the reality of the work of Jesus, or perhaps one could say that Paul was able to comprehend the Old Testament better after understanding the impact that Jesus had upon the world. This perspective enables the Christian to rightly understand who he is, his identity in Christ, in the context of God's plan of redemption for the world.

Paul recognized that the Christian's identity in Christ is shaped by two foundational perspectives of redemptive history. In the first perspective, Paul described all of humanity as being either in Adam or in Christ, the two great representative heads of all mankind. This is foundational to understanding the Christian's identity as "in Christ," and it provides the framework for the application of union with Christ to the life of the believer. In the second perspective of redemptive history, Paul contrasted living under the Mosaic Law to being united by faith to Christ, through whom believers inherit the promises of God. Paul here described a shift from an identity of being under the Law to an identity of being in Christ.

In Adam/In Christ

In 1 Corinthians 15:21-22, the Apostle Paul made the brief but profound statement, “For since by a man came death, by a man also came the resurrection of the dead. For as in Adam all die, so also in Christ all will be made alive.” Paul made this statement within an argument for the bodily resurrection of all believers from the dead (1 Cor. 15: 1-19). Paul included the analogy between Christ and Adam as a way to explain the connection between Christ’s work and all those who are in him. Charles Hodge explained the analogy this way:

We die *by means of* Adam, because we were *in* Adam; and we live *by means of* Christ because we are *in* Christ. Union with Adam is the cause of death; union with Christ is the cause of life.¹

Central to Paul’s argument is that, in at least one way, Christ is like Adam. Adam is a representative and Christ is a representative, and there are no other representatives at this most basic level. The life or death of an individual is based solely on whether he is united with Adam or with Christ. As Herman Ridderbos wrote:

Adam and Christ here stand over against each other as the two great figures at the entrance of two worlds, two aeons, two “creations,” the old and the new; and in their actions and fate lies the decision for all who belong to them, because these are comprehended in them and thus are reckoned either to death or to life.²

This is the foundational principle for understanding the Christian’s identity in Christ. The believer is no longer in Adam, leading to death, but in Christ, leading to life. His identity is “in Christ.” In 1 Corinthians 15:21-22, Paul simply hinted at this doctrine, but explored it more fully in Romans 5:12-21.

¹ Charles Hodge, *An Exposition of the First Epistle to the Corinthians* (Reprint, Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1969), 324.

² Herman Ridderbos, *Paul: An Outline of His Theology*, trans. John Richard De Witt (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1975), 60-61.

A Brief Exposition of Romans 5:12-21

In Romans 5, Paul presented his fullest treatment of the Adam/Christ parallel. Here Paul emphasized the differences much more than the similarities. Adam and Christ are presented as parallel figures heading in exactly opposite directions. Paul began his argument by clarifying Adam's position as a representative head in verse 12, "Therefore, just as through one man sin entered into the world, and death through sin, and so death spread to all men, because all sinned" Here Paul explicitly stated that death entered the world through Adam's sin. He then used Adam's role in death entering the world as the foundation to explain Christ's role. Thus, Adam's role must be rightly understood in order to understand Paul's larger argument.

Adam as a Type of Christ

Understanding how Adam acts as a type of Christ first requires an understanding of Adam's role in Paul's argument. There are some important disagreements between conservative commentators in their understanding of Romans 5:12. Robert Mounce understood $\epsilon\phi' \tilde{\omega}$ (translated "because" in most translations) to mean "with the result that." Therefore he concluded:

The primary cause of our sinful nature would be the sin of Adam; the result of that sin would be the history of sinning on the part of all who enter the human race and in fact sin of their own accord.³

³ Robert H. Mounce, *Romans*, The New American Commentary (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1995), 142.

In other words, Adam ruined his own nature by sinning and passed that ruined nature down to every human being generating from him; thus, all sin and all die.

William Hendriksen differed from Mounce by emphasizing the federal headship of Adam in the first part of verse 12 when he wrote, “[Paul] obviously means that the entire human race was included in Adam, so that when Adam sinned, all sinned”⁴ However later, he interpreted the words “because all sinned” at the end of verse 12, in a way similar to Mounce. He wrote, “In all probability this refers to sins all people have themselves committed after they were born.”⁵ He based his argument on Paul’s use of the phrase “all sinned” in Romans 3:23 which referred to individual sins, arguing it would mean the same thing in Romans 5:12. Hendriksen further argued that it would be needlessly repetitive for Paul to refer to the representative nature of Adam at both the beginning and end of the verse.⁶

Mounce and Hendriksen agree that, at least at some level, Romans 5:12 is referring to the actual sins of individuals. Certainly individuals have sinned ever since the fall. Adam’s own son Cain killed his brother Abel (Gen. 4), and by Genesis 6:5 it was written, “Then the Lord saw that the wickedness of man was great on the earth, and that every intent of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually.” Clearly people sinned in grievous ways after sin entered the world. However, this does not seem to be the focus of Paul’s thought in this section.

⁴ William Hendriksen, *Exposition of Paul's Epistle to the Romans*, New Testament Commentary (Reprint, Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 2002), 178.

⁵ Ibid. John Calvin also holds to this position, see, John Calvin, *Commentaries on the Epistle of Paul the Apostle to the Romans*, trans. John Owen (Reprint, Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1984), 199–201.

⁶ Hendriksen, 178–79.

Differing from Mounce and Hendriksen, John Murray came to a single conclusion about the entire passage, “that for some reason the one sin of the one man Adam is accounted to be the sin of all.”⁷ Murray argued that since verses 15-19 focus entirely on the universal reign of death being related to the one act of Adam’s disobedience, it makes little sense to assume that verse 12 makes a single, unconnected, unexplained reference to individual sin.⁸ Further supporting the idea that verse 12 only references the imputed sin of Adam, Murray argued that verses 13 and 14 act as a parenthetical statement amplifying verse 12. In these verses Paul argued that though there was sin in the world between the time of Adam and Moses (when God gave the fullest expression of his Law), sin could not be imputed or charged against men because they were not breaking a revealed law of God. “Nevertheless death reigned from Adam until Moses . . .” (vs. 14). Paul seemed to be posing the question, if their sin could not be imputed to them, why did death reign? Clearly, because all men are initially represented by Adam and damned by his sin. Murray helpfully clarified the argument:

The main thought is that “death reigned . . . over those who did not sin after the similitude of Adam’s transgression” (vs. 14) If this is once recognized, then we may ask at the outset: what bearing does that observation have upon the thought of verse 12? In verse 12 the doctrine of particular significance to the argument being developed is that death came to all men, not by reason of their own actual transgressions or individual sin but because of their involvement in the sin of Adam . . .⁹

Taking verses 12-14 together seems to strengthen the argument that the focus is on Adam as the representative head for all who are in solidarity with him.

⁷ John Murray, *The Epistle to the Romans*, Vol. 1 (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1959), 185.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid., 187.

It is important to understand this initial argument correctly, not primarily so that the reader will appreciate humanity's relationship to Adam, though that is important, but because Paul was using Adam as a type to point to the work of Christ. Supposing that Paul's argument included the actions of individual sinners as well as the actions of their representative head dilutes the force of the argument when the analogy is applied to Christ and his people. Paul's focus was on the importance and implications of Adam's one act, and later Christ's one act, not the subsequent actions of those they represent. With this point demonstrated, Paul then began to contrast Adam and Christ as representative heads.

Adam and Christ Contrasted

In Romans 5:15-21, Paul expanded the comparison between Christ and Adam. Whereas Paul's focus in verses 12-14 was to show how Adam and Christ are similar as representatives of humanity, he focused in verses 15-19 on the numerous ways in which they and their works are different. Paul began this section, "But the free gift is not like the transgression..." (Rom. 5:15). Adam's one act of disobedience (vs 19) was a transgression which resulted in condemnation for all men (vs. 16) and therefore death for all (vs. 17); Jesus' one act of righteousness resulted in justification (vs. 18), righteousness (vs. 19) and life to all (vss. 17, 18, 21). Further, Paul argued that the one act of Jesus' obedience is vastly superior to Adam's disobedience. Jesus' free gift of obedience abounds (vs. 15, 19); it is much more (vs. 17) than the one act of disobedience. The one act of Christ not only dealt with the transgression of Adam and the condemnation flowing from it, it further dealt with the transgressions that increased when the Law was added (vs. 20). These were not two equal acts; the one act of transgression condemned all to death, but the one free gift of grace justified the guilty and made them righteous.

Finally, in dealing with this issue of headship, there is a significant component that is not expressly discussed in Romans 5. Paul did not discuss how a person can move from being in Adam to being in Christ. If one were to read this passage of Scripture in isolation, one might think that all people were in Adam and now all people are in Christ. However, that was not the point Paul was making. He was dealing with Adam and Christ as the representative heads of all humanity: those under the headship of Adam (that is, all that physically derived from him and who have not been delivered from the dominion of darkness [Col. 1:13]) and those who transition into the headship of Christ (that is, all who receive the free gift of grace that Christ purchased by willingly dying on the cross for the sins of the world and rising again on the third day). Transitioning from the headship of Adam to the headship of Christ is better known as God's work of salvation. And yet how is this transition accomplished? Answering this question requires a brief excursus into the covenants and God's interaction with mankind.

Excursus: The Reformed View of the Covenants

Throughout history God has interacted with humanity through self-revelation. Often, at major points in history, this self-revelation has taken the form of various covenants.¹⁰ In Reformed Theology the entire scope of redemptive history is subsumed under two major covenants: the covenant of works and the covenant of grace.¹¹ Neither of these two

¹⁰ The most clearly identifiable covenants would be the covenants with Noah (Gen. 9), Abraham (Gen 17), Moses or the Old Covenant (Ex. 20ff), David (2 Sam. 7), and the New Covenant (expressed in the New Testament Scriptures). There are other promises throughout Scripture that do not use the covenant language that are also considered significant such as God's statement in the Garden of Eden (Gen. 3:15).

¹¹ The Covenant of Redemption (or God's inter-Trinitarian covenant to save a people) is not discussed in this paper. For more information on the Covenant of Redemption see Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*

covenants are explicitly mentioned in Scripture, but they are used in Reformed Theology to put into context the great work of God. Therefore, to understand how God worked throughout history to move individuals from being in Adam to being in Christ, it may be helpful to understand what is being communicated by this theological system of traditional Reformed Theology. The following is only the briefest sketch of these covenants and many important details will not be discussed.

The Covenant of Works

The covenant of works is certainly the more controversial of the two covenants in this system. It suggests that before the Fall, Adam was in a probationary state with one explicit prohibition, “From the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat from it you will surely die” (Gen. 2:17). This was a “special test of Adam’s covenant faithfulness, one that Adam failed.”¹² Louis Berkhof wrote, “If Adam stood the test, this life would be retained not only, but would cease to be amissible, and would therefore be lifted to a higher plane.”¹³ The covenant is simple: perfect obedience is rewarded with life and any disobedience is punished with death. Theoretically, if Adam had not eaten from the fruit, then after some amount of time he and all of humanity would be have been brought into eternal life, no longer able to sin. The phrase “covenant of works” is not intended to imply that there was no grace in the relationship between Adam and God.

(Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1938, 1996), 267ff, and Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1994), 518–519.

¹² John Frame, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Christian Belief* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2013), 63. Frame prefers the term “Edenic covenant” as opposed to “covenant of works.”

¹³ Berkhof, 213-214.

Adam's existence was all of grace; Adam's relating to God at all was grace; Adam having ability to obey was grace; yet the focus of the outcome was based on Adam's work of obedience, thus the name "covenant of works."

The ongoing implication of the covenant of works is in its result rather than the specific rules of the initial covenant itself. Within the covenant of works, perfect obedience is required. Wayne Grudem wrote:

Is the covenant of works still in force? In several important senses it is. First of all, Paul implies that perfect obedience to God's laws, if it were possible, would lead to life.... We should also notice that the punishment for this covenant is still in effect, for 'the wages of sin is death' (Rom. 6:23).¹⁴

However, the specifics are no longer in effect. "We are no longer faced with the specific command not to eat of the tree"¹⁵ In Reformed Theology, this is the unalterable relationship between God and mankind; there must be perfect obedience. However, after the sin of Adam as its representative head, all of humanity was condemned through his one act; and not only that, but all humanity has lost the ability to obey perfectly by inheriting Adam's sinful nature, thereby adding transgression upon transgression.

The covenant of works is useful to present the implications of the representative headship of Adam and its implications on all of humanity. It emphasizes the hopeless state of all people to have a right relationship with God and the desperate condition of every person, completely impotent to save themselves. The covenant of works is also, and perhaps more importantly, used to exalt Christ and his work. As we have seen in Romans 5, Jesus' one act of righteousness (his death on the cross) is set against Adam's one act of

¹⁴ Grudem, 518.

¹⁵ Ibid.

disobedience. Where Adam failed, Jesus succeeded. Therefore, Jesus met the demands of the covenant of works and inherited life. All those united with Christ are then also inheritors of life because through that union with Christ they receive the benefits of his work and righteousness.

The Covenant of Grace

The covenant of grace is used in Reformed Theology to describe God's promise and work to merit and accomplish salvation for those who cannot merit or accomplish it themselves. There are two things to consider before beginning this brief review of the covenant of grace. First, the covenant of grace does not refer to one particular covenant, but rather it encompasses all the promises of God and all the covenants God made with His people, save the covenant of works. It was revealed over time in various ways.¹⁶ Second, where the covenant of works was a conditional covenant, in that the ultimate end was conditioned on the response of Adam, the covenant of grace is unconditional. This does not mean that there are no requirements, only that the ultimate end of accomplishing salvation for God's chosen people is based wholly on God's unconditional commitment to save.

The covenant of grace was first hinted at in God's statement about the seed in Genesis 3:15. There God made the unconditional promise of enmity between the serpent and the women, between her seed (Christ) and the serpent's seed. In Genesis 9, the covenant of grace was expanded in God's dealings with Noah. God made an unconditional covenant not to destroy the world again with water (vs. 11), and God gave commands that required a

¹⁶ John Frame has an extensive discussion on how the covenant of grace is expressed in various covenants. (Frame, 67ff.) Louis Berkhof presents a detailed discussion of the elements of the covenant of grace. (Berkhof, 272ff.)

response of faithful obedience (vs. 1-7). Both the conditional and unconditional elements were present in this covenant.

The covenant of grace became clearer in God's covenant with Abraham which was initially presented to him as a promise. When God called Abraham out of his own country, God promised to give him land, to make him a great nation, and to bless all the nations through him (Gen. 12:1-3). Many years later God solemnized these promises into a covenant (Gen. 17: 1-14). In the covenant God vowed to make Abraham the father of nations (Gen. 17:4), to give him and his descendants the land of Canaan (Gen.17: 8), and to make his covenant an everlasting covenant with the seed of Abraham (Gen. 17:7). These promises are foundational to God's plan of salvation. Yet, even here in this most explicitly gracious promise, a faithful response was required. Abraham was to be "blameless" before God (Gen 17:1), and the covenant members were to be circumcised (Gen. 17:10ff). John Frame helpfully pointed out, "All covenants require obedient faith. This is not a condition of one covenant or another; it is essential to all human dealings with God."¹⁷

The covenant which most clearly articulated the requirement of faithful obedience was God's covenant with the children of Israel at Mount Sinai where God gave the Law to Moses (Ex. 20ff). The Law will be more fully discussed in the next section of the paper, but for here it is sufficient to understand that even the Mosaic covenant (Old Covenant) was a covenant of grace. As Frame wrote:

Like the other covenants, then, the Mosaic covenant is unconditional, in that God certainly achieves the purposes for which he made the covenant. But it is conditional, in that Israel receives the blessing only by a living, obedient faith.¹⁸

¹⁷ Frame, 70.

¹⁸ Ibid., 74.

The laws given were never intended to merit salvation. The conditional elements were highlighted due to the national character of the covenant and its role in the governmental and legal life of the fledgling nation, but even so they required a response of faithful obedience rather than a response of merit-seeking.

Finally, the New Covenant expresses the unconditional nature of the covenant of grace most completely. The New Covenant, prophesied in Jeremiah 31:31-34, and inaugurated with the blood of Jesus on a Roman cross, displays God's unalterable purpose to save a people for himself. In Jesus, God himself became incarnate to meet the righteous demands of his own Law. John Murray wrote:

The only righteousness conceivable that will meet the requirements of our situation as sinners and meet the requirements of a full and irrevocable justification is the righteousness of Christ.¹⁹

Christ also took upon himself the curse of the Law (Gal. 3:13). This included the condemnation related to the sin of Adam and the accumulation of all the curses from the Old Covenant that had been added since the fall of Adam. It is Christ's work that unconditionally meets all the requirements of the covenant, yet to be a member of the covenant, one must respond with faithful obedience. Here in the most gracious of covenants, a faithful response is still a necessary element. Through faith the believer is brought into the covenant, and faithful obedience is the believer's continual response to the covenant.

The covenant of grace, expressed through all the covenants listed above does not then, in the final analysis, move an individual out of the covenant of works, but rather it brings the individual out of Adam and moves them into Christ. This is the great story of

¹⁹ John Murray, *Redemption Accomplished and Applied* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1955), 16–17.

redemptive history: God rescues men who were represented by Adam and thereby condemned for his failure to keep the Law, and places them in Christ who met all the demands of the Law and who presents them justified to a holy God. However, in addition to looking at redemptive history from the perspective of being in Adam or in Christ, Paul also looked at redemptive history from the perspective of being under the law or in Christ.

Under the Law/In Christ

As the Apostle Paul, under divine inspiration, developed Adam's relationship to Christ in redemptive history, Paul likewise clarified Old Covenant truths by interpreting them through the lens of the life and work of Jesus Christ. This precipitated a better understanding of the right place of Old Covenant Law within the New Covenant, and highlighted a significant shift as the Old Covenant ended and members of the New Covenant no longer lived under the Law but lived in Christ instead.

The Old Covenant community existed within the context of the Mosaic Law of God. The Mosaic covenant was filled with minutely detailed laws that guided and governed every aspect of the Old Covenant member's life. In Romans 3:19, Paul wrote that "whatever the Law says, it speaks to those who are under the Law" In a real way the people of God were "under the Law" in the Old Covenant.

God also provided covenant promises (such as those in God's covenant with Abraham); indeed, God gave the promises before the Law. But perhaps because the Old Covenant was so Law centered, the Israelite community of Paul's day largely misunderstood the role of the Law. They were prone to view obedience to specific laws as a way to merit righteousness, rather than considering the Mosaic Law as a means for responding to God with faith. Herman Ridderbos wrote about their perception of the use of the Law:

The law guarantees the Jews their position before God: it is for them the divine privilege, in the midst of the universal sinfulness of man, to gain merit, reward, righteousness before God. On that account the multiplicity of separate commandments is a powerful instrument of redemption.²⁰

The Jews reveled in God's gracious dispensation of the Law to their community, for only from within the community did they have access to the Law. With the Law they could perform acts of righteousness to merit redemption. Therefore, the more laws, the more opportunity to build up merit, reward and ultimately redemption.

Paul's writings assumed that the Jews had misunderstood the role of the Law in the Old Covenant. In Galatians 2:16, Paul admonished the Christian Jews of Galatia, reminding them that, "a man is not justified by the works of the Law" The Law cannot serve that function, it cannot make a sinful man right before God. The Mosaic Law certainly had a place in the covenant community; it clarified the righteous life (i.e. Ex. 20:1-17), it specified the ways in which the community could interact with God (i.e. Lev. 16-17), it kept them separate from the other nations (i.e. Deut. 7) and it taught them that blood was required to pay for their sins (i.e. Lev. 4-6), among many other things. However, the special covenant role of the Law came to an end when Christ died on the cross. No longer were the people of God under the Mosaic Law, they were now in Christ. Paul presented a lengthy argument to this effect in Galatians 3.

A Brief Exposition of Galatians 3

In his letter to the Galatians, Paul called the church back to a right understanding of the Mosaic Law and the gospel. Some in the church were preaching a distorted gospel (Gal.

²⁰ Ridderbos, 171.

1:7), a message contrary to the gospel they had received from Paul and believed. The opponents against whom Paul was arguing seemed to hold the position of those on the losing side of the Jerusalem Council, which taught that “unless you are circumcised according to the customs of Moses, you cannot be saved” (Acts 15:1). This teaching, though overruled by the Jerusalem council, continued to spread in some form throughout the church.²¹ Thus, Paul sought to deal thoroughly with the topic of the Mosaic Law so that the Galatians would no longer be “bewitched” (Gal. 3:1) but would hold fast to the true gospel of Christ. He sought to encourage them with the truth that they were no longer under the burden of the Law but were now free in Christ.

The Argument

Paul began his argument by reminding his readers that they had received the Spirit by faith, not by the Law (vs. 2). “Paul assumes that they had received the Spirit . . . and that they knew that they had received him when they heard and believed the law-free gospel.”²² Paul also reminded the Galatians that attempting to be perfected now by obedience to the Law is the work of “the flesh” (vs. 3), not the Spirit who had already begun in them the work of sanctification. And finally, Paul reminded them that it is God who gives the Spirit and works miracles among them, not by the Law, but by “hearing with faith” (vs. 5). In these opening verses of Galatians 3, Paul compelled his readers to compare being under the Mosaic

²¹ William Hendriksen, *Exposition of Galatians*, New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1968), 17ff.

²² F. F. Bruce, *The Epistle to the Galatians: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, New International Greek Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI: W.B. Eerdmans Pub., 1982), 149.

Law with the advantages of having the Spirit by faith, and challenged them to not abandon their faith by going back under the Law which was impotent to save them.

Paul went on to attack the evident pride of the Galatian, Jewish believers who thought themselves sons of Abraham, declaring that “it is those who are of faith who are sons of Abraham” (vs. 7) and “those who are of faith are blessed with Abraham, the believer.” (vs.

9). Timothy George stated it this way:

Paul’s rebuttal was a stinging rebuke to the theology of the Judaizers . Descent by blood or physical procreation does not create sons of Abraham in the sight of God The true children of Abraham are those who believe, literally, those who ground their relationship with God and thus their very existence itself on the basis of faith.²³

It is faith that is the ultimate context for relating to God, not the works of the Mosaic Law or physical kinship with Abraham who himself was justified by faith (vs. 11). The Law only brings a curse, because to live by the Law requires a perfect obedience (vs.10) which is impossible for all those born of Adam and stained with his sin. The Law cannot justify, it can only condemn.

In contrast to the Law’s inability to justify, Jesus “redeemed us from the curse of the Law, having become a curse for us” (vs. 13). This is the crux of Paul’s argument. The Law brings a curse which Christ alone can take away; only in Christ can justification be found. As Paul wrote, “In Christ Jesus the blessing of Abraham might come to the Gentiles, so that we would receive the promise of the Spirit through faith” (vs. 14). In summary, the Christian receives the Holy Spirit through faith in Christ, not by keeping the Mosaic Law; the Christian is connected to the blessings of Abraham through faith, not the Law; the Law brings nothing but a curse, but Jesus redeems his people from the curse. For these reasons, Paul exhorted

²³ Timothy George, *Galatians*, The New American Commentary (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1994), 223–24.

the Christians in Galatia that they should not rely on the Mosaic Law, but believe on Christ and keep on believing on Christ.

The Promise, the Law and Christ

Paul continued in Galatians 3, to bolster his argument that relating to God through faith is far more wonderful than through the Law. He first demonstrated how the promise of inheritance is made to Christ; he next explained the role of the Law and its lack of connection to receiving the inheritance promised to Christ; and finally he declared that believers are connected to Christ and thereby made heirs with him to the promise. Indeed, it is far better to be found in Christ than to remain under the Mosaic Law which has served out its purpose.

In Galatians 3:1-15, Paul emphasized the value and benefits of faith over those of the Law and explained Christ's relationship to the Law (becoming a curse for us [vs. 13]). In verses 16-18, Paul shifted his focus to how the promised inheritance relates to Christ. Paul used a revolutionary but curious phrase in verse 16, "Now, the promises were spoken to Abraham and his seed. He does not say, 'And to seeds,' as referring to many, but rather to one, 'And to your seed,' that is Christ." Certainly, Paul knew that the word "seed" may refer to many seeds, and certainly he understood the theological point that the promise was made to Abraham's descendants (he made that point himself earlier in the chapter).²⁴ But looking through the lens of the New Covenant, Paul was making an important theological point that clarified the promises to Abraham. As Timothy Georges wrote:

the word "seed," he observed, is singular, not plural; therefore in its deepest and fullest meaning it refers to one person, not to many. And that one person, Paul contended, Abraham's true seed, is Christ himself.²⁵

²⁴ Hendriksen, 134.

²⁵ George, 247.

This is a profound shift; no longer can the promises of a land, a people and a blessing made to Abraham be confined to his physical descendants, but rather the promises to Abraham focus and culminate in the person and work of Jesus Christ. In this one curious sentence Paul centered the entire scope of the redemptive history on one man. Herman Ridderbos wrote it this way:

Paul proclaims Christ as the fulfillment of the promises of God to Abraham, as the seed in which all the families of the earth shall be blessed . . . the eschatological bringer of salvation whose all-embracing significance must be understood in the light of prophecy . . . the fulfillment of God's redemptive counsel concerning the whole world and its future.²⁶

As the promises of God to Abraham were foundational to the creation of the Old Covenant people of God, here Paul clarified that their ultimate fulfillment is in Jesus and through him to all the peoples of the earth. The promised inheritance includes a people that will be in Christ, justified by faith in Him, and heirs with Him (vss. 22, 24, 29).

However, Paul did not immediately connect believers to this promised inheritance, but first dealt with the Law's relationship to the promise. He argued that the Law, which was given to Moses, could not annul the covenant promises of God, which were given to Abraham 430 years earlier (vs 17). The Law was given for a very specific reason, "because of transgressions," and it was given for only a specific duration of time, "until the seed would come" (vs. 19). The Mosaic Law was added not as a "supplement to [the promise], . . . it was added to the human situation for a special purpose . . . totally different from that of the promise."²⁷ William Hendriksen explained that "[the Law] was given to man in addition to

²⁶ Ridderbos, 51.

²⁷ Bruce, 176.

the promise in order to bring about within his heart and mind an awakened sense of guilt.”²⁸

The Law was added because of the sins of the covenant people to heighten their sense of need for a redeemer.

The Mosaic Law then played the role of tutor to the people of God (vs. 24). They were “kept in custody under the Law, being shut up to the faith which was later to be revealed” (vs. 23). So the Mosaic Law was not contrary to the promise, but rather it was used by God to prepare the people for the fulfillment of the promise. It gave a covenant context for the people of God to learn righteousness and holiness and to see that they could never meet the standard of God. It taught God’s people about guilt and bloodshed, about sin and death. For several hundred years the people of God remained under the tutelage of the Law, learning and waiting for the faith to be revealed.

Finally, at the end of chapter 3, Paul tied the many strands of his point together. Earlier in the chapter Paul wrote that all who believe are Abraham’s descendants and receive the blessings with him, but later explained that the promises were made to only one descendant, Christ. In verses 26-29, Paul explained this seeming contradiction, juxtaposing several important and precious truths. In verse 25, Paul declared that with the coming of faith the people of God are no longer under the tutelage of the Law. Rather, “you are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus” (vs. 26). Faith and not works draws one into this relationship. Ultimately, this is not a point of contention between the Law and Christ. In the context of the Old Covenant, used rightly, the Law led to faith and elicited the faithful response of obedience. Only when the Law was abused and twisted to seek for merit and justification did it become a mode of works-righteousness. However, even the appropriate

²⁸ Hendriksen, 140.

use of the covenantal Law came to an end with the death of Christ on the cross. That does not mean that there is no place for law in the New Covenant, only that it is no longer the covenantal structure which governs the people of God's relationship to God. As noted in the excursus above, every covenant between God and man requires a faithful response of obedience; the New Covenant is no different in that respect. However, the New Covenant is different from the Old in that it is not structured around law but around a relationship of faith in Christ. Its members are not under the Law, but in Christ.

Next in verses 27-28, Paul went further, writing:

For all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free man, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus.

This relationship of faith is deeper than a mere fellowship of friends. As F. F. Bruce explained, "To be 'baptized into Christ' is to be incorporated into him by baptism, and hence to be 'in Christ.'"²⁹ This relationship in the New Covenant is one where the members are brought into a spiritual union with Jesus Christ. But it is not an individual union; rather, all the people of God together are made one in Christ and one together, no longer under the Mosaic Law but in Christ.

At the end of the chapter in verse 29, Paul connects the argument back to verse 16 by writing, "And if you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's descendants, heirs according to promise." Herman Ridderbos is again helpful:

Christ and the believers can be spoken of as the one seed of Abraham . . . and it can be said of them that they, although many, are one body in Christ . . . indeed that they are one (*heis*) in Christ . . .³⁰

²⁹ Bruce, 185.

³⁰ Ridderbos, 62.

The argument comes together here. The promise of God to Abraham is fulfilled in Christ, and the promise is connected to the people of God, the true descendants of Abraham, in that they are united with Christ. This union impacts the individual, but it is inclusive of the entire community of believers, one in Christ and one each other. This is an immeasurably significant shift from being an individual under the Mosaic Law to belonging to Christ and with him being an heir of the promises to Abraham; it undergirds and defines the Christian's entire identity.

This chapter has examined two different perspectives from which Paul paints the big picture of redemptive history. From one perspective, all of humanity is found either in Adam, required to give perfect obedience to the Law of God, or in Christ who graciously fulfilled the requirements of the Law and took on himself the curse of the Law. From another perspective, the people of God came out from under the tutelage of the Mosaic Law, which had no power to give life, and into union with Christ, thereby becoming heirs with him. From these two perspectives on the great shift of redemptive history, one can see the fundamental impact that being in Christ has on an individual's identity. In Christ the believer no longer approaches God through the Law's structures of cleanliness and temple sacrifice but now approaches God through the blood of Christ, united with him through faith.

CHAPTER 3

THE CHRISTIAN'S IDENTITY IN CHRIST: THE SCOPE

Since Adam's fall, sin has brought about spiritual death and condemnation which has touched all of creation, including every human being. Paul taught that through union with Christ, God is bringing and will bring healing and wholeness to a world shattered by sin. Specifically, God is redeeming for himself a people, bringing them back into a right relationship and communion with himself by joining them to his Son. Paul's doctrine of union with Christ included the whole Godhead involved in the restoration of a whole person. As J. Todd Billings wrote, "Full deity and full humanity belong together in communion."³¹ Sin has killed that communion, and apart from Christ there can be no restoration. Paul described a person's becoming in Christ as a radical act of the Triune God whereby the individual's old life ends and new life in Christ lives on for eternity. This chapter will consider the scope of the work of God to accomplish this union with Christ, and the scope of the effect of union with Christ on the identity of the believer.

³¹J. Todd Billings, *Union with Christ: Reframing Theology and Ministry for the Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2011), 43.

A Whole God Salvation Accomplished

The Christian religion is often rightly focused on the person and work of Jesus Christ. After all, he is the one “who gave Himself up for our sins so that He might rescue us from this present evil age . . .” (Gal. 1:4). However, it is incorrect and unbalanced to see salvation as only the work of Jesus. Envisioning Christ as the loving savior who struggles to save mankind from the wrath of the Father distorts Jesus’ role, heretically picturing the Father as cruel, distant and uncaring, while leaving the Holy Spirit out altogether. This distortion could not be further from the way Paul depicted the work of the entire Trinity in accomplishing salvation for the people of God.

In Ephesians 1:3-14, the Apostle Paul practically exploded with praise for what the Triune God has accomplished for the believer in Christ. The Greek text presents this as one long 202 word sentence.³² In this long, single but complex expression of praise, Paul drew attention to each member of the Trinity and his role in the work of salvation. It is the “God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us with every spiritual blessing . . .” (vs. 3). The Father is the source and origin of the blessing. Peter O’Brien wrote of the Father:

His initiative is seen at every point: it is he who has ‘blessed us’ (v. 3), ‘chosen us’ (v. 4), ‘destined us to be his sons and daughters’ (v. 5), ‘lavished his grace upon us’ (vv. 6, 8), made known to us his plan and purposes for the world (vv. 9–10), and accomplishes all things in accordance with his will (v. 11).³³

³² For a detailed technical discussion of the sentence structure see, Harold W. Hoehner, *Ephesians: An Exegetical Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2002), 153-161.

³³ Peter Thomas O’Brien, *The Letter to the Ephesians*, The Pillar New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI: W.B. Eerdmans, 1999), 91.

The Father is the one who initiates, purposes, chooses, and ultimately “works all things” (vs. 11). Yet in this passage, all that the Father does for his chosen people is accomplished in Christ.³⁴

Throughout this catalogue of blessings Christ plays the central role in accomplishing the work of the Father. In Christ the believer is blessed (vs. 3). In Christ the believer is chosen before the foundation of the world (vs. 4). Through Christ the believer is predestined to adoption (vs. 5). “In the Beloved” grace is freely bestowed by God the Father (vs. 6). In Christ we are redeemed and forgiven (vs 7). John Murray poignantly wrote, “As far back as we can go in tracing salvation to its fountain we find ‘union with Christ’; it is not something tacked on; it is there from the outset.”³⁵ At every point Paul encompassed all the blessings of God as being “in Christ.”

This litany culminates in verses 10 and 11 where Paul wrote of “the summing up of all things in Christ, in the heavens and things on earth” (vs. 10) William Hendriksen explained it this way:

literally everything, things in heaven, things on earth, everything above us, around us, within us, below us, everything spiritual and everything material, has even now been brought under Christ’s rule.³⁶

³⁴ There has been some disagreement about the meaning of “in Christ” in this passage. However, the commentaries referenced for this paper were all in agreement that this is referring to a real connection between the believer and Christ. Andrew Lincoln focused more on the connection to Christ as the representative head, see, Andrew T. Lincoln, *Ephesians*, Word Biblical Commentary (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 1990), 21–22., while Harold Hoehner seemed to see both the representative nature of the union and a more spiritual union, see, Hoehner, 171–72.). William Hendriksen and Peter O’Brien both focused on the Spiritual relationship between Christ and the believer, see, William Hendriksen, *Exposition of Ephesians*, New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1967), 71. and O’Brien, 87 and 92.)

³⁵ John Murray, *Redemption Accomplished and Applied* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1955), 162.

³⁶ Hendriksen, 86.

All things are summed up in Christ, all things are brought under his rule, but Paul was not finished. “In Him also we have obtained an inheritance . . .” (vs. 10-11). All things will ultimately be given to Christ, and Christians have an inheritance in that future glory.³⁷ Clearly, Paul was attempting to emphasize the saving blessings that come to the believer through the work of Christ.

Yet throughout this long sentence, where the Father plays the determinative role and Christ plays the active role, the Spirit quietly plays an applicatory role. This is noted first in verse 3, where Paul told the believers of the Father’s bestowing on them every “spiritual blessing” in Christ. Peter O’Brien commented, “Here the adjective *spiritual* means ‘pertaining to or belonging to the Spirit’, and thus ‘spiritual blessings’ signify those which ‘properly pertain to the life of the Spirit.’”³⁸ Therefore all the blessings being rehearsed are applied to the believer through the work of the Holy Spirit.

Paul also ended this lengthy section by bringing the Holy Spirit into the foreground. He wrote in verse 13, that “you were sealed in [Christ] with the Holy Spirit of promise.” So not only are all the blessings of God in Christ communicated to the believer through the Holy Spirit, but indeed it is the Holy Spirit that seals the believer to Christ. This led John Murray to write, “Hence when we say that union with Christ is *Spiritual* we mean, first of all, that the

³⁷ This translation follows William Hendriksen (Hendriksen, 86-87). Harold Hoehner took an opposite position, translating this phrase, “in whom also we were made a heritage” (Hoehner, 225). Following Hendriksen, the point of the believer’s inheritance in Christ was made here in vs 11. Following Hoehner, the point would be made with vs 14 where the believer’s inheritance is clearly in view. Also supporting this larger point of the believer’s inheritance in the glorified Christ is the later connection in Eph. 1:20 and 2:6 where the parallel language implies the believer being raised up to be seated with Christ at the right hand of the Father (see. Thomas Allan, “Exaltation and Solidarity with Christ. Ephesians 1:20 and 2:6,” *Journal for the Study of the new Testament* 28 (1986): 104.)

³⁸ O’Brien, 95.

bond of this union is the Holy Spirit himself.”³⁹ Sinclair Ferguson added, “For Paul, to have Christ is to have the Spirit, because Christ indwells us through the Spirit.”⁴⁰ Finally, about the Holy Spirit, Paul wrote in verse 14 (as translated by Harold Hoehner), that he is “the initial installment of our inheritance.”⁴¹ The Holy Spirit, who Himself was promised, is given as an earnest payment to guarantee more is to come. William Hendriksen helpfully and movingly wrote:

The first installment is, accordingly, a pledge or guarantee of glory to come, a glory arriving not only when soul and body part but also and especially in the great consummation of all things at Christ’s return. The fruits which this indwelling and sanctifying Spirit bestows (Gal. 5:22, 23)—such as love, joy, peace, longsuffering, kindness, faithfulness, meekness, self-control, and their marvelous product: assurance of salvation (2 Peter 1:5–11)—are “first-fruits” (Rom. 8:23). They are a foretaste of future, ineffable bliss. The full inheritance—salvation viewed as God’s gracious and abiding gift, not bought with money, nor earned by the sweat of human toil, nor won by conquest—will one day be the believers’ portion, for them to possess and to enjoy, to God’s glory.⁴²

The Holy Spirit communicates every blessing of God in Christ, seals Christ to every believer thereby initiating his union with Christ, and finally is given as a pledge of the believer’s ultimate inheritance.

In Ephesians 1:3-14, Paul clearly showed that the whole God, each member of the Godhead, is invested and active in the work of salvation, drawing sinners into a spiritual union with Christ. This truth serves as the bedrock of the Christian’s identity in Christ. For Paul, the Christian’s union with Christ is not a small thing or an after-thought, but it is a

³⁹ Murray, 166.

⁴⁰ Sinclair B. Ferguson, *In Christ Alone: Living the Gospel Centered Life* (Lake Mary, FL: Reformation Trust Publishing, 2007), 114.

⁴¹ Hoehner, 241.

⁴² Hendriksen, 91.

monumental work involving the whole Trinity, planned in eternity past before the foundation of the world and stretching on into eternity future with Christ.⁴³ This union is foundational not only to an individual believer's identity, but to the formulation of the church's corporate identity. The passage is filled with 'us' and 'we,' signifying the corporate nature of this work and the corporate nature of the union. Together the whole the church universal is united with Christ. God's plan of salvation in Christ spans all of time and covers every nation.⁴⁴ The Christian finds the basis of his identity in this great work. He is united with Christ according to the purpose of the Father and through the working of the Holy Spirit.

A Whole Person Salvation Effected

As noted throughout this paper, Paul's doctrine of union with Christ is not a small thing; it is expansive. It is expansive with regard to time—it is eternal—it is expansive with regard to scope—it is global—and it is expansive with regard to individual impact—it is total. This section of the paper focuses on this last point; Paul taught that union with Christ is a complete reorientation and revitalization, in fact a rejuvenation, of the whole person. This change has both objective elements, redemptive historical realities that are objectively true about the one united with Christ, and subjective elements which impact the believer's experience. Paul consistently applied this doctrine in his writings, urging believers to focus

⁴³ Murray, 164.

⁴⁴ Vss. 12 and 13 present a strong argument for the global nature of this union. Vs. 12 seems to point to the Jewish believers, "we who were the first to hope in Christ" and vs. 13 is contrasted probably referring to gentile believers, "you also, after listening to the message of truth." The focus seems to be that being "in Christ" is inclusive of all those in the world that have believed on Christ. They are together united with Christ.

objectively on their new identity in Christ and to work out the implications of that new identity subjectively.

Paul represented this new identity through union with Christ in many ways, but this section will focus on two that helpfully emphasize the radical impact union with Christ has on the identity of the believer. Paul taught that when a sinner is united with Christ he first dies with Christ and then he is raised with Christ; these two events express the complete and real change that takes place within every Christian. Both death in Christ and resurrection in Christ have objective and subjective elements.

The Old Identity Has Died in Christ

Paul taught that when an individual is united with Christ, he is joined with Jesus in his death. Objectively, this means that when the individual believes on Christ, his old, sin-dominated identity dies with Christ. Subjectively, this means that since the power of reigning sin has been broken, the believer is empowered to fight and defeat sin. Thus, he experiences the lessening power of sin in his daily life. These objective and subjective perspectives are intimately connected and often interwoven in Paul's teaching but will be separated here for individual consideration.

Objectively the Sinner Has Died with Christ

In Romans 6:3, Paul wrote, "Or do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus have been baptized into His death?" For Paul, when a person is united with Christ they are united with the reality of Christ's death. Richard Gaffin summarized it this way:

The baptism is "into Christ" (cf. Gal. 3:27); that is, baptism signifies union with Christ. This union is understood in a quite concrete manner. It is union with Christ

in all phases of his messianic work and all that he is by virtue of this work
Believers are united with Christ in his death; his death was specifically a death to sin .
. . .⁴⁵

In verse 6, Paul added this image, “Knowing this, that our old self was crucified with Him, in order that our body of sin might be done away with, so that we would no longer be slaves to sin.” Here Paul used the phrase “old self” to describe “the person we once were, our human nature considered apart from grace.”⁴⁶ John Murray, in his characteristically precise way, added, “Our old man is the old self or ego, the unregenerate man in his entirety”⁴⁷ Paul used both the imagery of crucifixion and burial to encapsulate the entire complex of Christ’s death—both dying on the cross and being dead and buried in the ground—to communicate the objective nature of this union. The old self, the old identity, has been executed on the cross and is now dead and buried.

Paul referred to this as a completed reality. He wrote in Galatians 2:20, “I have been crucified with Christ; and it is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me” Here Paul declared that he, himself had died in this transaction. He was so invested in and identified with the old self that was alienated from God and in rebellion to God, that when the old self died, in a real way he died. The very being of Paul as the enemy of God was killed on the cross with Christ. Paul, here, deals with time in an unusual way. He wrote as if his old identity were taken back to the cross and united with Christ in his death, a death which occurred some years before Paul was converted. However, Paul’s identity did not change

⁴⁵ Richard Gaffin, *Resurrection and Redemption: A Study in Paul's Soteriology*, 2nd ed. (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 1987), 45.

⁴⁶ Hendriksen, 197.

⁴⁷ John Murray, *The Epistle to the Romans*, Vol. 1 (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1959), 219.

until much later when he personally believed in Jesus. Thus, it was when he believed, that he was united with Christ in his death, and his old identity died with Christ.

Paul wrote about the death of his old identity another way later in Galatians, “The world has been crucified to me, and I to the world” (6:14). In Christ’s death, not only had Paul died to himself, but he had died to every part of the world that was in opposition to God. Herman Ridderbos here emphasized the corporate reality of this death:

All these expressions—died (crucified) to sin, the law, the world—denote what is fundamentally the same reality. They are the powers of the old aeon, and it is the old, all-embracing life-context from under whose control the church has been delivered in the death of Christ.⁴⁸

When Paul wrote of dying to sin, the world and self, he certainly envisioned a corporate salvation, the church being severed from the old order, the cursed world of Adam. However, Paul applied this at the individual level. Individuals die to sin, the world and self, and individuals are united with Christ through faith and thereby united to other believers who have also been delivered from sin, the world and self.

This is the identity that Paul pressed upon his readers. He wrote, “You laid aside the old self with its evil practices” (Col. 3:9). This is who you are, Paul told the Colossian believers. You have laid aside the old self in the past. In Christ, that self is dead. Earlier in the same epistle Paul wrote, “And in Him you were also circumcised with a circumcision made without hands, in the removal of the body of the flesh by the circumcision of Christ” (Col. 2:11). Here Paul portrayed this removal of the old self as flesh cut away in circumcision. That old life has been irrevocably severed and killed. In Christ, the old life of

⁴⁸ Herman Ridderbos, *Paul: An Outline of His Theology*, trans. John Richard De Witt (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1975), 211.

sin, with its power over the individual and its curse in Adam, has been completely removed; it is dead. It no longer represents the identity of the believer; he has been set free.

Subjectively the Believer Is Killing Sin Through Christ

Paul never seemed interested in simply defining this new identity in Christ; rather he kept seeking to make his readers consider the implications of their new identity. In Paul's writings, the objective reality of being freed from the bondage of sin, was always connected to its subjective impact on the life of the believer. In Galatians 5:24, Paul wrote, "Now those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires." Here the objective and subjective are brought together. F. F. Bruce commented about the objective nature of this verse:

It is because they are Christ's in the sense of being members of Christ, incorporated ἐν Χριστῷ, that they have 'crucified the flesh'. The aorist probably indicates their participation in Christ's historical crucifixion.⁴⁹

These people are objectively in Christ and have crucified the flesh. Yet Paul was writing so this objective truth would impact their subjective experience. Bruce continued:

The ἐπιθυμίαι are the desires by which the παθήματα ('passions') are directed this way or that; if unchecked, they will express themselves in 'works of the flesh'. There can be no more decisive check upon them than their 'crucifixion.'⁵⁰

⁴⁹ F. F. Bruce, *The Epistle to the Galatians: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, New International Greek Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI: W.B. Eerdmans Pub., 1982), 256.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

William Hendriksen summarized this as Paul saying, “Let them therefore be what they are. Let them be in practice what they are in principle, for in principle they had crucified their old human nature.”⁵¹

This mindset of practicing what you are in principle is seen throughout Paul’s epistles. In Romans 6, after proclaiming the objective reality that believers had been baptized into Christ’s death and thus had died with Christ (vss. 3-10), Paul moved to the obvious conclusion, “Even so consider yourselves to be dead to sin, but alive to God in Christ Jesus. Therefore do not let sin reign in your mortal body so that you obey its lusts” (vss. 11-12). Paul reasoned that since believers have objectively been freed from the power of sin, therefore they must not allow sin to rule them.

Paul was not placing the burden of perfection on his hearers. Indeed, he went on to chronicle his lifelong experience of fighting sin (Rom. 7:14-25). Though the old self is dead, and the power of sin is broken, yet the effects of sin, the temptations to sin and human weaknesses still remain. The difference is that sin no longer has dominion; the Christian is able to succeed in killing sin, little by little. John Murray commented, “Deliverance from the dominion of sin is both the basis of and the incentive to the fulfilment of the exhortation, ‘Let not sin reign.’”⁵² The objective reality of dying in Christ results in the subjective experience of increasing victory over sin.

In the epistle to the Colossians, Paul used the Christian’s identity in the death of Christ to warn his readers away from receiving false teachers and, ultimately, a false religion.

⁵¹ William Hendriksen, *Exposition of Galatians*, New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1968), 226.

⁵² Murray, 227.

The Colossian believers had been delivered from sin and the legal demands of the Law by being united with Christ in his death (Col. 2:11-15). So Paul implored them, in verses 16-19, not to add extra requirements to their faith. This culminated in Paul's statement in Colossians 2:20, "If you have died with Christ to the elementary principles of the world, why, as if you were living in the world, do you submit yourself to decrees . . . ?" Paul went on to list the man-made decrees that were being added to the simple faith in Christ. William Hendriksen clarified this connection:

You have also in that very act [of dying with Christ] made a complete break with all such rudimentary instruction that bases its hope upon anything apart from Christ and fullness of salvation in him.⁵³

They were being tempted to look to lesser, man-made laws and rules and strange teachings which were leading them away from Christ (Col 2:19). Paul reminded them of their identity in Christ and in His death. He reminded them of their freedom in Christ and the value of what they had gained in Christ to call them away from the temptations of idolatry and false religion. The objective truth of their identity in Christ's death was the grounds for the subjective experience of clinging to the pure religion of faith in Christ.

The Christian's union with Christ in his death is the essential starting place for the Christian's new identity. New life cannot be experienced until the old life dies away. The Christian's identity in the death of Christ is that he has died to himself, to sin, to the world and to the whole complex of the creation in rebellion against God. With this objective reality at the front of his mind, the Christian is able to enter into real warfare with his sin, and because he is no longer bound to its power, he is able to be increasingly victorious.

⁵³ William Hendriksen, *Exposition of Colossians and Philemon*, New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1964), 130.

The New Identity Is Alive in Christ

If being united with Christ in His death is one side of the coin, then the other is being united with Christ in his resurrection. Whereas being united with Christ in his death involves the painful reality of needing to be freed from the old identity of sin, being united to Christ in his resurrection encompasses the joyful beginning of new, vibrant life, a new identity that grows in ever increasing likeness to Christ and culminates in perfection and glory throughout eternity. This union with Christ in his resurrection is the most significant aspect of the Christian's new identity. While being united with Christ in his death frees the believer from the bondage of sin, as important and vital as that is, it is the new life in Christ which comes from being connected to His resurrection that fills the Christian with zeal, hope and joy.

Here again Paul dealt with this union in terms of both objective truths and subjective implications. Objectively, Paul taught that believers united with Christ in his resurrection will be raised with him in the future and yet are also raised with Christ now. The Christian's new identity in Christ is a reality in the present experience of the believer, but it will be fully realized only in the final resurrection of the dead. Subjectively, in their present connection to the resurrected Christ, believers are enabled to live a life of good works and righteousness.

Objectively the Believer Is Made Alive in Christ

Paul had both a future and a present orientation when applying the truth of the believer's union with Christ in his resurrection to the Christian's identity. Ultimately, the Christian's identity is future oriented; as Christ rose, the Christian too shall bodily rise in the last day, united to Christ eternally. Yet through the believer's present union with Christ, Christ is at work in the believer transforming him into who he will be. In both cases the

Christian's core identity is no longer that of a self-focused, self-ruled individual—that identity has died with Christ; the Christian is now living in Christ and for Christ.

Paul wrote that Christ is the “first fruits of the dead” (1 Cor. 15:20-23), and “firstborn from the dead” (Col. 1:18). These two terms refer to the connection between Christ and all those who are in him. Richard Gaffin explained:

"First fruits" expresses the notion of organic connection and unity, the inseparability of the initial quantity from the whole . . . His resurrection is the representative beginning of the resurrection of believers. In other words, the term seems deliberately chosen to make evident the organic connection between the two resurrections.⁵⁴

The point of Paul's argument in 1 Corinthians 15:12-23 was to infuse his readers with confidence that their own resurrection was sure because Jesus had already been raised from the dead.

Paul presented the hope of the Christian similarly in 1 Thessalonians 4:14, “For if we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so God will bring with Him those who have fallen asleep in Jesus.” There will be a moment in time when Jesus, the first fruits, the firstborn from the dead, will return and with him bring all those who have died believing in Jesus. Paul made this connection in Colossians 3:4 as well, “When Christ, who is our life, is revealed, then you also will be revealed with Him in glory.” According to Paul, there will be an end, Jesus Christ will return in glory (1 Thess. 4:16), and all things will be brought under his rule (Phil. 2:10-11). The hope of the Christian is that in some like manner, he too will be raised in glory, in a new, imperishable, physical body, free from the corruption of death (1

⁵⁴ Gaffin, 34.

Cor. 15:50ff) because—and only because—he is united to Christ in his resurrection. As Christ lives, so all who are in him will live.

However, just as important to Paul was the truth of the Christian's present union with Christ in his resurrection. The future hope is that he will be raised up with Christ, but in the present he is raised spiritually in Christ. Paul wrote in Ephesians 2:5 that God, "even when we were dead in our transgressions, made us alive together with Christ" The concept of "dead" here should not be confused with Paul's doctrine of being united with Christ in his death, as discussed earlier, which is a dying to the power of sin so that the Christian is free from its bondage. Here Paul was making a different point, which is that though the individual was spiritually dead and utterly unable to help himself, God graciously intervenes to give him new life which is connected with Christ. Paul did not make all the connections to faith that are required for salvation because that was not his point; instead Paul was simply and clearly conveying that God is the initiator, the one who brings to life, and that that life comes by being connected to the risen Christ.

Paul went even further in Ephesians 2:6, making the time-bending comment that God, after producing life, "raised us up with Him, and seated us with Him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus." In the present time the believer, when united to Christ, is united to the past event of Christ being exalted to the right hand of God! Paul was making a bold statement, using the same language he used just a paragraph earlier (Eph. 1:20-21) to describe Jesus being raised up and seated with the father "above all rule and authority." Paul was connecting the believer, united to Christ, to that exalted position with Christ.⁵⁵ Peter O'Brien

⁵⁵ This point is made in Thomas Allan's article, (Thomas Allan, "Exaltation and Solidarity with Christ. Ephesians 1:20 and 2:6," *Journal for the Study of the new Testament* 28 (1986).)

helpfully wrote, “Not only do the readers participate in Christ’s resurrection life; they also share in his exaltation and consequent victory over the powers.”⁵⁶ The Christian’s identity in Christ is a new life that is exalted in power in the heavenly places.

Objectively, this new identity results in a completely new life for the Christian. His old identity has died and a new identity has taken its place. The scope of this new life impacts the totality of the individual presently and for eternity. Currently, the believer is spiritually alive in Christ and reigning with Christ, and on a day in the future he will be raised physically from the dead to live eternally.

Subjectively the Believer Lives in Christ

The objective reality of the Christian’s life emanating from the resurrected life of Christ, results in real subjective changes in the life and experience of the believer. It requires a complete reorienting of life that comes from having died to self, sin, and the world in the death of Christ and being raised to new life in the resurrection of Christ. This life in Christ is not just a concept or perspective; it impacts the existential experience of the Christian.⁵⁷ When Paul wrote that “it is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me” (Gal. 2:20), he was describing the radical change that took place in his life. This is not a “mystical depersonalization” or an “absorption of the human ‘I’ . . . into the pneumatic ‘I’ of Christ” as Herman Ridderbos pointed out, but rather, “Christ dwells and rules in him and no longer his

⁵⁶ O'Brien, 171.

⁵⁷ For a good discussion of the existential or “experiential” nature of this union, see Gaffin, 50–51.

own, old 'I.'"⁵⁸ Objectively he was made alive, and subjectively that new life is lived in Christ. As F. F. Bruce explained:

Having died with Christ in his death, the believer now lives with Christ in his life—i.e. his resurrection life. In fact, this new life in Christ is nothing less than the risen Christ living his life in the believer. The risen Christ is the operative power in the new order, as sin was in the old.⁵⁹

When sin was the dominating force for the individual, he was cut off from God and left to hopelessly rule himself. When the individual believes on Christ and is united to Christ in faith, Christ becomes the dominating force in his life; Christ becomes both the ruler of his life and the power by which to live his life.

The transition from self-rule to Christ-rule necessarily results in a changed direction of life. The Christian is “to walk in newness of life” (Rom. 6:4). This change is intrinsically moral, as the believer’s moral compass is reset to live in such a way as to be able to “bear fruit to God” (Rom. 7:4). This fruit is good works, not undevout, rote, outward actions, but a whole person change toward morality, a desire to do good to please God. “The reference is to the fruit of good attitudes, aspirations, words, and works . . . directed to the glory of God Triune.”⁶⁰ The heart, mind and will of the believer is being altered through life-giving union with Christ, which results in the bearing of good fruit.

Objectively, the believer’s position and identity in Christ is unalterably and completely settled when he is united to Christ. However, his subjective experience of the changes resulting from new life in Christ may be fast or slow, depending on a multitude of

⁵⁸ Ridderbos, 232.

⁵⁹ Bruce, 144.

⁶⁰ William Hendriksen, *Exposition of Paul's Epistle to the Romans*, New Testament Commentary (Reprint, Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 2002), 216–17.

factors such as the individual's spiritual state (whether he is lively or dull or sliding back into sin) or the individual's cultural setting (whether there are cultural blind spots or blessings that slow or promote the pursuit of holiness). Paul's point was not that union with Christ precipitates instantaneous perfection in daily life, but instead that the believer can expect to experientially make progress in righteousness. Righteousness in the believer will increase because Christ is *in* him and Christ is *working* in him.

Paul demonstrated the subjective outworking of union with Christ in his letter to the Colossians. He wrote, "You laid aside the old self with its evil practices" (Col. 3:9), referring to dying with Christ, "and have put on the new self who is being renewed to a true knowledge according to the image of the One who created him" (vs. 10), referring to being united with Christ in his resurrection. The "new self," the new identity in Christ, is "being renewed." Richard Melick helpfully commented about this renewal:

It describes the process of change in the salvation experience. In Col 3:10 [Paul] made it clear that the goal of renewal is the image of the Creator. What was lost in the fall into sin is gained through the application of grace.⁶¹

The Christian united to Christ is being made into the image of Christ the creator. This requires a complete moral transformation which will span the believer's entire life and which will be completed only when he is raised up with Christ, no longer able to sin (Phil. 3:21).

This chapter has attempted to lay out the great scope of union with Christ. The Christian's identity is founded on the reality that the whole God (Father, Son and Spirit) has accomplished this salvation by uniting the whole person (every aspect of his being) with the death and resurrection of Christ. Whereas his identity had been dominated by sin, the

⁶¹ Richard R. Melick, *Philippians, Colossians, Philemon*, The New American Commentary (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1991), 296.

believer is granted a new, righteous identity in Christ. It is the purpose of the next chapter to demonstrate the profound impact of these foundational truths concepts in forming a framework for pastoral ministry.

CHAPTER 4

THE CHRISTIAN'S IDENTITY IN CHRIST: PASTORAL APPLICATION

Paul depended on his connection to Christ for every aspect of his ministry (Phil. 4:13, Col. 1:29). He taught that in order for the church to grow it must be actively connected to Christ, because all the blessings of God are mediated to the church through Jesus Christ (Eph. 1:3-14). Paul called the church the bride of Christ (2 Cor. 11:2, Eph. 5: 25ff); she exists because of that vital and necessary union with Christ, and she will be presented to Christ when he returns. Simply put, union with Christ is central to the life of the church. This chapter will apply Paul's teaching on the Christian's identity in Christ by setting forward some foundational perspectives for pastoral ministry in the church. This will not be a comprehensive model dealing with every aspect of the pastor's work, but rather it will present a helpful perspective on how a pastor should apply union with Christ to himself and the believers under his care.

Before developing this model for ministry, there are some introductory matters to consider. Most often Paul was writing to churches, not to individuals; therefore, when Paul wrote about union with Christ, he was either describing his own individual union with Christ (i.e. Phil. 3:7-10) or he was using the plural "you" to write about the church's union with Christ. Also, Paul sometimes referred to local churches (I Cor. 12) and sometimes to the universal church (Eph. 2:19-22). Noting these, there are a few interpretive choices of which the reader should be aware. First is the assumption that Paul's discussion of his own personal union with Christ can and should be broadly applied, at least to some degree, to every Christian's union with Christ; however, in some places it is clearly more appropriate to

apply Paul's experience primarily to the pastor's work and then secondarily to every Christian. Second, is the application of corporate aspects of union with Christ, denoted by Paul's use of second-person plural pronouns, to individuals functioning within the church community. Paul never wrote to a church in the abstract, but to real churches, made up of real people who had really been united with Christ. So although Paul gave instruction to the church as a whole, writing to them as a whole, he expected individual believers to respond. Thus, this paper will consider it right and good to apply the second-person plural to individuals as well as to the church as a whole. Thirdly, this paper will only apply references to the church to the local church. The pastor's work in the local church is part of the universal church, but his responsibility is to the visible manifestation of the body of Christ which has been entrusted to him.

The model for pastoral ministry presented in this chapter is delineated into three major sections. The first section lays a foundation by drawing principles from Paul's doctrine of union with Christ and applying them to the pastor's identity in Christ. If the pastor is not feeding his own identity in Christ and seeing his work through the light of that identity, then the rest of this chapter will be of little value to him. The second and largest section describes how Paul's interaction with believers serves as a model for how today's pastor should understand and encourage the individual Christian's identity in Christ. Lastly, the third section briefly considers the church's identity in Christ and provides some basic concepts for pastors to use as they help the church develop a corporate sense of identity as the body of Christ.

The Pastor's Identity in Christ

First and foremost, the pastor is a Christian. In all of his work as a pastor, he must first be one who is united to Christ through faith. This section will focus specifically on how a shepherd of Christ's church should see his pastoral role in the light of his identity in Christ. Everything discussed in later sections concerning the Christian's identity in Christ will, of course, be applicable to the pastor, but the focus here will be on what is emphasized specifically about the pastor's identity in Christ.

One might first think to look at Paul's letters to his two young disciples, Timothy and Titus, to start putting together a model for how a pastor should see himself. However, in those letters Paul was not dealing with the foundational perspectives underlying their work among the churches; instead, he wrote personal, practical letters to young men he knew well with specific instructions for how to continue on in the work. Therefore, Paul's other letters will be examined to discover what Paul wrote about himself and his identity in Christ as a pastor. The various ways in which Paul experienced his own connection and dependence on Christ will provide a framework from which a pastor can understand his work and suffering in the pastoral ministry.

The Pastor's Work in Christ

Books abound that detail the pastor's many responsibilities. The pastor must rightly focus on many different things from sermon preparation to out-reach programs, from one-on-one discipleship to church discipline, from evangelism to long-range planning. The variety and number of the pastor's tasks can be overwhelming and easily lead to discouragement, unless the pastor remembers that this is Christ's work. Christ gave him the work, sets his goals for the work, and gives him hope in doing the work.

The Source of the Pastor's Work

In Ephesians 4:10, Paul stated that Jesus “ascended far above then heavens, so that He might fill all things.” Jesus left the earth, at least in part, so that he might fill all things. Although Paul did not define specifically what filling all things means he presented this broadly defined goal within the context of Christ giving gifts to the church, implying that Christ gives gifts in order to fill all things. Paul went on to list the specific gifts Christ gives, “And [Christ] gave some as apostles, and some as prophets, and some as evangelists, and some as pastors and teachers” (Eph. 4:11). The gifts that Paul listed here are all specifically preaching and teaching gifts, roles in the church that are especially used for the spreading and maintaining of the church. Peter O’Brien commented that “Christ now sets out to accomplish the goal of filling all things by supplying his people with everything necessary to foster the growth and perfection of the body”⁶² Christ is completing his work of filling all things by building up the church, and the church is built up in part by the giving of pastors. The point here is that Christ is the source of the pastor’s work. Christ gave the gift to the pastor, and he gave the pastor to the church. Thus, as the pastor goes about his work, he does so knowing that he is doing the work Christ has given him.

Not only is Christ the ultimate source of the pastor’s work, but Christ is also the source of the pastor’s ability to do his work. In Paul’s letter to the Colossians he wrote, “For this purpose also I labor, striving according to His power, which mightily works within me” (Col. 1:29). The power with which Paul worked was the power of Christ working in him.

⁶² Peter Thomas O’Brien, *The Letter to the Ephesians*, The Pillar New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI: W.B. Eerdmans, 1999), 297.

William Hendriksen wrote, “Day by day, yes even moment by moment Christ’s enabling Spirit was at work within Paul’s entire person, bestowing strength upon body and soul.”⁶³ In a real and spiritual way, Christ enabled Paul to do the work that he was given to do. Christ gave the work and Christ gave the strength to do the work. This is the reality of the pastor’s identity in Christ, and it is only in the strength of Christ that the pastor can hope to successfully accomplish the overwhelming work of the ministry.

Paul had the immense task of bringing the gospel of Jesus to the gentile world. His work was ardently opposed by Jews (Acts 22:21-22) and gentiles (Acts 16:19ff, 19:23ff). He worked in the face of tension and division among his coworkers (Acts 15:36-41) and amid disappointment as other leaders struggled to live up to the faith they were proclaiming (Gal. 2:11ff). On top of all of this, Paul struggled with a “thorn in the flesh” (2 Cor. 12:7), an undescribed, painful reality that caused constant discomfort and difficulty. Paul acknowledged the hardships of his life when he wrote that he had labored through beatings, shipwrecks, imprisonments, and more (2 Cor. 11:23-28). These experiences enabled Paul to see his own weakness and inability as well as the power of Christ working in him (2 Cor. 12:9-10). Likewise, all pastors should trust that the power of Christ is working in them.

The modern pastor’s experience is rarely anything like that of the apostle Paul’s, especially in the West. Yet the difficulties and pressures of the pastor’s work are, even in the best of circumstances, beyond his human abilities. As Paul rhetorically asked in 2 Corinthians 2:16, “Who is adequate for these things?” In the face of spiritual enemies without and fears and weaknesses within, not to mention the cultural and intellectual

⁶³ William Hendriksen, *Exposition of Colossians and Philemon*, New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1964), 94.

opponents of an increasingly anti-Christian society, the pastor is unable to succeed in his own strength. It is in the reality that the work has come from Christ and that the strength to accomplish the work comes from Christ which encourages the pastor to press on, so that he can say with the apostle Paul, “I will rather boast about my weakness, so that the power of Christ may dwell in me” (2 Cor. 12:9). The pastor can continue, he can press on through every difficulty, knowing that in his weakness the strength of Christ will be displayed all the more brightly.

The Goal of the Pastor’s Work

Recognizing that Christ is the giver of his work and the power to accomplish his work, the pastor can heartily pursue the goal Paul laid out of bringing others into Christ and growing believers up in Christ. Here Paul’s personal experience serves as an example. He wrote of himself in Colossians 1:28, “We proclaim [Christ], admonishing every man and teaching every man with all wisdom, so that we may present every man complete in Christ.” Paul’s ministry was wide, including going to gentiles who knew nothing of the Christ, so the “every man” Paul was writing of encompassed a vast number of unreached people. The pastor’s work is part of that great work to reach the world, focusing first on the church in which Christ has placed him and then on all within reaching distance beyond.

James Dunn asserted that the work of “presenting every man complete in Christ” is a work of global restoration. He wrote, “The hope is for the restoration of wholeness throughout creation (‘everyone’). As creation only came to existence ‘in him,’ so the final

restoration is possible only ‘in Christ.’”⁶⁴ The pastor’s work of teaching and admonishing is for the purpose of bringing more and more people into maturity in Christ which brings restoration and wholeness. This he does within his specific context. Ultimately, this is an eschatological goal; Paul seemed to be thinking “in terms of the return of Jesus and the desire to see each Christian mature in the Lord.”⁶⁵ The pastor’s work is always in the context of anticipating the return of Christ. He looks forward to that day and diligently prepares to present to Christ a church mature and perfect in him.

Back in Ephesians 4, Paul wrote more directly about the goal of the pastor’s work. In verse 11, as discussed earlier, Paul wrote that Christ gave apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors and teachers to the church. In verses 12 and 13, Paul gave the purpose or goal of their work:

for the equipping of the saints for the work of service, to the building up of the body of Christ; until we all attain to the unity of the faith, and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to a mature man, to the measure of the stature which belongs to the fullness of Christ. (Eph. 4:12-13)

Whether the pastor is equipping the saints, doing the work of service and building up the body, or whether the pastor is primarily equipping the saints so that they are then doing the work of service and building up the body does not impact the goal of the pastor’s work. Certainly the pastor will be doing all those things, and certainly the equipped saints will also be doing these things. The point is that the pastor’s work is focused on nurturing the faith of

⁶⁴ James D. G. Dunn, *The Epistles to the Colossians and to Philemon: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, New International Greek Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing; Carlisle, UK: Paternoster Press, 1996), 126.

⁶⁵ Richard R. Melick, *Philippians, Colossians, Philemon*, The New American Commentary (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1991), 242.

those under his care so that there will be unity, greater knowledge of Christ and maturity, and so that ultimately the church will grow up more and more into Christ.

This is the pastor's God-given goal, the building up of the church. With so many things jostling for his attention, plans to be made and problems to solve, this should be the guiding star of his work, and the filter through which he arranges his calendar. Truly this is of first importance: pointing people to Christ and building them up in Christ. Everything else in his work is a distant second. The results of the pastor's work, however, are completely dependent on God. The pastor cannot convert people or even make them spiritually mature; only God can do that. The pastor's goal is to faithfully do the work that God has given him.

The Hope of the Pastor's Work

This third point is perhaps the most obvious. The pastor can hope for success because all his work and identity are bound up in Christ. This is not the goal-oriented standard for success as measured by the world. The pastor's goal is indeed to point people to Christ and build believers up in Christ; however, the size of his church and the holiness of its members are not the measure of his success. The pastor's hope for success here being considered is a more ultimate hope: Christ will be victorious in the world! And in Christ, the pastor will have a part to play in that victory. The size of his role is entirely up to Christ. Thus, the pastor who struggles faithfully for years with only one convert and the pastor under whose ministry thousands are saved and spiritually flourish are equally successful; both have accomplished the work that God planned for them in the building of his kingdom.

According to Paul, God the Father is ultimately the one who plans, purposes and determines the outcome of all things. The purposes of God are accomplished by Christ, but it

is God the Father that is in preeminent position. Paul wrote, “Thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ” (1 Cor. 15:57), and “Thanks be to God, who always leads us in triumph in Christ . . . ” (2 Cor. 2:14). God has determined that Jesus will be victorious and triumphant; the pastor’s hope is found in being united with Christ and thus united to that victory.

Paul wrote expressing this hope, “For I am confident of this very thing, that [God] who began a good work in you will perfect it until the day of Christ Jesus” (Phil. 1:6). Paul did not express confidence in his great evangelistic efforts or his teaching skills or his discipline, though all those were necessary for the church to grow and prosper. Paul’s confidence in the final success of the church was that the omnipotent and unstoppable God had begun the work in Christ and that God would complete the work in Christ. Paul gave himself to the work of the gospel with diligence and passion, yet his hope was that he was connected to Christ and in Christ there was an inevitable victory. This is the pastor’s hope.

The pastor’s work is overwhelming. If success depended on his ability and strength, then he would certainly fail, but it does not. Success depends wholly on the strength of Jesus Christ and the unalterable purpose of God, and thus success is ensured. The pastor’s responsibilities are immense: he has all the responsibilities of a Christian man, husband and father and the responsibilities for the nurture and spiritual wellbeing of his church.

Oftentimes he will feel like these responsibilities are pulling him in different directions, the need for personal devotions and prayer vying with the need to spend time with family while the needs of the church clamor at the door. As the pastor is working through the strength of Christ for the purpose of building Christ’s church, he cannot rightly do so by sinning, either by neglecting his own spiritual wellbeing or neglecting his family. Certainly working in the strength of Christ means at the very least obeying Christ. Therefore, the pastor must balance

all these responsibilities, not allowing the responsibilities of church to elbow out responsibilities to family or his own soul. Though it may seem counter-intuitive, giving disproportionate attention to the church to the neglect of personal responsibilities will actually, in the end, damage the pastor's ministry. Only by keeping focused on the source, goal and hope of his work in Christ is he freed to balance his responsibilities and faithfully pastor the church Christ has entrusted to him for the glory of God.

The Pastor's Suffering in Christ

Paul was a man who suffered in the extreme for the sake of the gospel of Christ. This paper has already discussed some of what Paul endured. Indeed when the Lord revealed Paul's calling to Ananias, he said, "for I will show him how much he must suffer for My name's sake" (Acts 9:16). Most pastors won't suffer in the same way that Paul suffered; they experience neither the scope of his calling nor the depth of his suffering. Yet still there is a reality of suffering in all Christian ministry. Truly every Christian is called to suffer with Christ (as discussed later), but the pastor suffers peculiarly in his work.

Paul charged his young disciple Timothy not to be ashamed of Christ, but to "join with me in suffering for the gospel according to the power of God" (2 Tim. 1:8). For Paul, to enter into the service of Christ was to enter into the sufferings of Christ. In Colossians 1:24, Paul explained how he viewed his work, "Now I rejoice in my sufferings for your sake, and in my flesh I do my share on behalf of His body, which is the church, in filling up what is lacking in Christ's afflictions." Paul considered his ministry a continuation of Christ's earthly suffering. As William Hendriksen wrote, "The apostle is undergoing these hardships

in the place of Jesus, since Jesus himself is no longer here to endure them.”⁶⁶ Thankfully, most pastors are never called to endure the sufferings of Paul, yet the principle remains. The pastor’s work is a hard work.

Paul’s sorrow and affliction were not always physical; they were also emotional (Rom. 9:2, 2 Cor. 2:4). Paul was broken-hearted for his lost country men. He felt distress and sorrow when his spiritual children grieved. This is a suffering common to all who give their hearts to the work of ministry. Part of being called into the work of the gospel of Christ is entering in and filling up the suffering of Christ. This is part of the pastor’s identity in Christ.

Disappointments and heartache are unavoidable in the pastoral ministry. The pastor’s work is performed in the context of his own sin and the sin and brokenness of those around him. The results of the pastor’s work are ultimately out of his hands and left to God. He cannot make people be saved; he can woo and plead and compel with all his faculties, yet some will run the other way. There will be promising Christians that fall to temptation and make a shipwreck of their souls. There may be rumors, factions and division in his church. His character may be slandered and his family may hurt for the cause of Christ. Suffering is a part of this work.

The work cannot be done without investing love and energy, which means the pastor opens himself up to be hurt for Christ’s sake. Ignoring and failing to prepare for this reality will likely bring either a calloused self-protection which destroys the heart of ministry or an emotional collapse which ends ministry. Only when the pastor can rightly see his suffering

⁶⁶ Hendriksen, 86.

in the context of being in Christ can he truly say with Paul, “I rejoice in my sufferings for your sake.”

The pastor’s work cannot begin by focusing outward on his duties or his congregation. The pastor must first find his identity in Christ to rightly view his work in Christ and identify his suffering in Christ so that he can work diligently and joyfully for the glory of Christ. When the pastor’s identity is firmly founded in the person of Jesus Christ, all his work is understood by its connection to Christ, and all his experiences are filtered through his union with Christ. This frees him from people-pleasing because he rightly recognizes the goal and understands that success is measured as being in Christ. The pastor is called by Christ to be faithful to the Word of God and to his savior, not to the shifting sands of culture and society or even a particular churches tradition. He can balance his responsibilities to home and church, knowing that the Christ who gave him the care of his family also gave him the care of his church. His calling is from Christ, his ability comes from Christ, his goal is to point his people to Christ, and his hope is that in Christ will there will be victory. When he suffers, he rejoices to fill up what is lacking in the affliction of Christ, for the sake of his church. This is the focus of the pastor; this is his work.

The Christian’s Identity in Christ

As noted above the goal of the pastor’s work is to “present every man complete in Christ” (Col. 1:28) within the context of his sphere of responsibility. The two remaining sections of this chapter will seek to lay out from Paul’s writings a framework for the pastoral application of union with Christ to individuals and to the church as a whole. As believers find their identity both individually and corporately more and more in Christ, they will more

and more experience the joy, blessing, peace and usefulness in Christ's kingdom that come from a life fully lived for the glory of God.

This section will focus on the pastoral application of the union with Christ to the individual Christian. This is the largest part of the pastor's work. As he preaches and counsels, as he comforts and exhorts, he is dealing with individual Christians. He is dealing with their successes and failures, their good works and sins, their strengths and weaknesses, and their right thinking and confusion. In all these various contexts the pastor must keep at the forefront of his mind that these are fundamentally ones who are united with Christ, and he must keep pressing those individuals to remember and experience the reality of their new life and new identity in Christ. The following sections will explore the Christian's identity, both objectively and subjectively, the Christian's responsibility and the Christian's assurance.

The Christian's Identity in Christ: Objective

Paul taught that when a person believes on Jesus Christ and through faith is united to Christ then several things immediately become objectively true of that individual. These truths form the foundation of the Christian's identity in Christ. They are constantly true of the Christian, never waxing or waning despite the ups and downs of emotions and the consistency of obedience. For the comfort, encouragement, and motivation of the Christian, these truths should be often on the lips of the pastor in sermons and in counsel. This is who the Christian is in Christ.

Christ Bears the Wrath of God for the Christian

The most basic of these objective truths is that in Christ the Christian is innocent before God. Paul declared clearly in Romans 8:1, "Therefore there is now no condemnation

for those who are in Christ Jesus.” Yet, although Paul knew he was united with Christ (Rom. 6-7), in his subjective experience he still struggled with remaining sin (Rom. 7:14-25). This struggle was so frustrating to Paul that he desperately cried out for help, “Wretched man that I am! Who will set me free from the body of this death?” (Rom. 7:24) The reality of sin continued to impact Paul’s experience, though he hated it and fought against it with varying degrees of success. That is the real experience of every Christian. But right after this desperate entreaty Paul proclaimed the central, objective truth that those in Christ need fear no condemnation. For though sin remains in their subjective experience, in Christ the Christian stands forgiven and innocent before God.

God accomplished this innocence for truly sinful people by “sending His own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh and as an offering for sin” (Rom. 8:3). This offering of Jesus for sin was “a propitiation in His blood” (Rom. 3:25). William Hendriksen wrote that the propitiatory sacrifice was:

Christ Jesus himself. It was he who gave—voluntarily offered—his blood; hence his life; hence himself (1 Tim. 2:6) for his sheep, bearing the wrath of God in their stead, thereby causing them to be reconciled to God.⁶⁷

Sinful Christians stand objectively innocent before God because Christ took upon himself the guilt of all those in him. He stood in the place of his sinful people and received the wrath of God that was due to them. In that sacrifice, Christ became sin (2 Cor. 5:21). Paul summarized this reality, “In [Christ] we have redemption through His blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of His grace” (Eph. 1:7). This is the simple but bedrock foundation to the Christian’s identity; in Christ he is forgiven.

⁶⁷ William Hendriksen, *Exposition of Paul's Epistle to the Romans*, New Testament Commentary (Reprint, Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 2002), 132.

In the light of this truth, the Christian is freed to fight sin, not out of fear of condemnation, but out of love and gratitude for God. This intrinsic reality of the believer's identity enables the pastor to rightly put into context the ongoing struggle with sin. The Christian can be encouraged to keep striving, keep repenting, keep believing, because he is no longer condemned before God. Being forgiven by God through the work of Christ is the foundational objective reality of union with Christ on which all the other realities are built.

Christ Provides a Perfect Righteousness for the Christian

In addition to being forgiven, the Christian is given the righteousness of God. In 2 Corinthians 5:21, Paul wrote, "He made Him who knew no sin to be sin on our behalf, so that we might become the righteousness of God in Him." The full interpretation of this verse is somewhat difficult, but Murray Harris argued that Paul was writing of a double-imputation; the reckoning of human sin to Christ and the reckoning of Christ's righteousness to humanity. He concluded, "Certainly the literary symmetry of the juxtaposed opposites, ἁμαρτία and δικαιοσύνη, supports such an inference."⁶⁸ In other words, Jesus had the experience of righteousness—"he knew no sin." "We"—all humanity—have the experience of sin. Jesus became something outside his experience (sin, ἁμαρτία) so that humanity could receive something outside their experience (righteousness, δικαιοσύνη).

For the struggling Christian, this reality can be empowering and freeing. He is not only forgiven, thereby becoming morally neutral, but he actually stands before God as righteous because of the work of Christ. For the Christian heart-broken by sin, repenting and

⁶⁸ Murray J. Harris, *The Second Epistle to the Corinthians: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, New International Greek Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI; Milton Keynes, UK: W.B. Eerdmans Pub.; Paternoster Press, 2005), 455.

seeking hope, this is a foundation to stand upon. Paul applied this in a particularly helpful way in 1 Corinthians 6. In verse 9, Paul emphatically stated, “The unrighteous will not inherit the kingdom of God” and then went on to catalogue the notoriously unrighteous, such as fornicators and adulterers, as well as the very commonly unrighteous, such as coveters. No sinner, however great or small or private or public his sin may be, will enter God’s kingdom. And, Paul went on to remind them in verse 11, “Such were some of you.” But something happened! Paul went on, “But you were washed, but you were sanctified, but you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and in the Spirit of our God.” When the believer is united with Christ, he is washed clean (forgiven of sin), sanctified (set apart as holy),⁶⁹ and justified (proclaimed to be righteous). Anthony Thiselton simply and helpfully commented, “The source of being set apart as holy [sanctified] and put right in your standing [justified] is sharing Christ’s identity”⁷⁰ Paul is pastorally reminding the Corinthians of their new identity in Christ. Likewise, the pastor can comfort the struggling Christian with this reminder, that whoever he was, whatever he did, and whatever remaining sins, habits, weaknesses and struggles still plague him, in Christ he has been washed. He has been made holy and he is right before God. He is no longer defined by that sin; he is now defined by his identity in Christ.

⁶⁹ Paul was not talking about the progressive work of sanctification where the believer is made actually holy or actually righteous. Paul was writing about something that was completed in the past for the believer, not a future state of the believer. Paul wrote that the believer *was* sanctified (aorist, form of ἁγιάζω).

⁷⁰ Anthony C. Thiselton, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, New International Greek Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI: W.B. Eerdmans, 2000), 454–55.

Christ Draws the Christian into the Family of God

As though the gifts of forgiveness and righteousness were not enough, Paul taught that God also objectively bestows on the Christian united to Christ entrance into the family of God. God intimately binds the Christian to himself, inviting them to call him Father. God adopts the believer as a beloved son, and even more, an heir. Pastorally, the application of this objective truth can powerfully shape how the believer approaches God and shape how the believer understands the loving way with which God the Father receives him in Christ.

In Romans 8:9-17, Paul explained some of the objective implications of union with Christ. He wrote that in Christ the believer is indwelt by the Spirit (vs. 11) and that all those who are indwelt by the Holy Spirit are “sons of God” (vs. 14) and “children of God” (vs. 16). That Spirit, Paul argued is not a “spirit of slavery leading to fear again,” but it is a “spirit of adoption as sons by which we cry out ‘Abba Father!’” (vs. 15). John Murray helpfully explained the role of the Holy Spirit:

[The Holy Spirit] is called the ‘Spirit of adoption,’ not because he is the agent of adoption but because it is he who creates in the children of God the filial love and confidence by which they are able to cry, ‘Abba Father’ and exercise the rights and privileges of God’s children.⁷¹

Through union with Christ, the Christian is drawn by the indwelling Holy Spirit into the closest circle of family relationship with God.

This familial relationship is presented in the context of putting sin to death (Rom. 8:13). Knowing the Christian life always involves struggle with remaining sin, Paul encouraged his readers not to enter into this hard work as slaves motivated by fear, but to enter the work as children seeking to please their father. Pastors should often remind the

⁷¹ John Murray, *The Epistle to the Romans*, Vol. 1 (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1959), 296.

Christians in their care that they are children of God and God loves them as a father. When they attempt righteousness, God will happily receive their feeble attempts as a father receives the feeble attempts of obedience from a young child. In Christ they are adopted into God's family.

Paul expanded further in the following verses of Romans 8. Not only are all those in Christ sons of God, but “if children, heirs also, heirs of God and fellow heirs with Christ . . .” (vs. 17). All Christians are adopted and united with Christ in such a way as to join in his inheritance from God. Specifically, Paul had in mind being, “glorified with [Christ]” (vs.17). In Christ, the believer is a child of God and an heir to a portion of the inheritance which is allotted to Jesus Christ. This is the exalted reality of every Christian, no matter how simple and ordinary his life may seem. However, this reality is also radically demanding. The Christian's entire identity has been utterly transformed from lowly sinner and rebel to child of God. Todd Billings helpfully put this in perspective:

We would rather have the occasional brush of God's presence, or a relic of his solidarity with us, so God can be an appendage of *our* identity. But God wants more than that; he wants our lives, our adopted identity. . . . There are few things more countercultural than this process of adoption—losing your life for the sake of Jesus Christ, to find it in communion with the Triune God.⁷²

To be brought into such close relationship to God and to have one's identity completely remade through union with Christ can be overwhelming.

The Christian may find times when he wants to go back to the old ways, the old self-driven identity. The pastor should remind his flock of their identity in Christ; theirs is an exalted place. When they are tempted to fall back, the pastor should remind them of the

⁷² J. Todd Billings, *Union with Christ: Reframing Theology and Ministry for the Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2011), 18.

great love of God that brought them into his family and the sure future that awaits them as heirs with Christ. They are children of God and no matter how mean and low their position in this world may be, and no matter the struggles and weaknesses they are experiencing, this is who they are in Christ, children of God with an inheritance waiting for them.

Christ Gives the Christian Citizenship in His Kingdom

By virtue of being in Christ, the believer is forgiven, made righteous, and adopted into God's family, but there is also a transfer of citizenship. In Christ the Christian is no longer a part of the rebellious creation. His citizenship has been transferred into the Kingdom of Jesus Christ. He is no longer a part of the world at war with Christ but is now aligned with Christ's great work of reconciliation. He is no longer part of the fading creation that will one day be finally destroyed but part of the new creation which will last forever.

Paul wrote of this basic transaction in Colossians 1:13, "[God] rescued us from the domain of darkness, and transferred us to the kingdom of His beloved Son" The citizenship of the believer in Christ is now in the Kingdom of Jesus, yet he remains in the world of sin and rebellion. His citizenship is in a kingdom that has not yet come, but is now forming. Paul wrote of the resurrected Jesus as the "first fruits of those who are asleep" (I Cor. 15:20), and the "firstborn from the dead" (Col. 1:18). Jesus' resurrection is the "firstfruits' [*sic*] of the resurrection harvest, the initial portion of the whole."⁷³ As Christ was raised in a glorified body fit for the new creation, so all those in him will likewise be raised in bodies like his. His resurrection body gives the first glimpse of the glorified future

⁷³ Richard Gaffin, *Resurrection and Redemption: A Study in Paul's Soteriology*, 2nd ed. (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 1987), 34.

kingdom of the new heavens and the new earth. This new creation is coming, but is not fully realized yet.

Paul put these points together in his letter to the Philippians, where he wrote:

For our citizenship is in heaven, from which also we eagerly wait for a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ; who will transform the body of our humble state into conformity with the body of His glory, by the exertion of the power that He has even to subject all things to Himself. (Phil. 3:20-21)

The citizenship of the believer is in heaven. He is waiting for that day when Jesus Christ will come down in his glorified body to “subject all things to Himself” and bring his kingdom, his new creation, fully into existence. In that day the bodies of all those in Christ will be changed to be like his, perfectly suited to live in the new creation with Christ and without sin forever.

Pastors should remind believers that they are in Christ and therefore their citizenship is not ultimately found here in this world. They will be inhabitants of the new creation that God will bring into existence in the future. In the midst of life’s struggles and pain, Christians must keep in view that they are pilgrims and aliens in a world that is at war with God and is dangerous for them. This sets realistic expectations for the present and realistic expectations of a glorious future.

The believer is not only connected to the new creation as something outside of himself, his new identity in Christ is actually part of that new creation. In 2 Corinthians 5:17, Paul wrote, “Therefore if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creature; the old things passed away; behold, new things have come.” Certainly Herman Ridderbos was correct that this includes “the new world of the re-creation that God has made to dawn in Christ, and in which

everyone who is in Christ is included.”⁷⁴ However, that does not minimize the individual focus of Paul, writing about individuals who are brought into the new creation when they are united with Christ. David Ejenobo commented, “The mystical union that Paul expects between a Christian and Christ was thus so total, such that the one in Christ could really be said to be ‘a new creation.’”⁷⁵ Individuals are radically changed when they are connected to the glorified Christ

Paul continued in 2 Corinthians to deal with his own role in the work of reconciliation, but the principle can be extrapolated to all those in Christ. He wrote:

Now all these things are from God, who reconciled us to Himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation, namely, that God was in Christ reconciling the world to Himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and He has committed to us the word of reconciliation. (vss. 18-19)

Christ’s work of bringing the new creation into existence is the work of “reconciling the world to himself.” Reconciliation is the work of God whereby he draws sinners into new life in Christ, yet the church as a gathering of renewed citizens of the new creation has been given the “word of reconciliation.” Believers have been brought into Christ’s great work as his ambassadors and messengers, taking his word of reconciliation out into the world. The role that each individual plays will vary widely based on interest, giftedness and passion; yet objectively, in Christ, each believer is part of this work.

Pastorally, this reality helps take the eyes of struggling Christians off of their own personal problems and difficulties and focuses them on the bigger reality of God’s great work

⁷⁴ Herman Ridderbos, *Paul: An Outline of His Theology*, trans. John Richard De Witt (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1975), 45.

⁷⁵ David Ejenobo, “‘Union with Christ’: A Critique of Romans 6:1-11.” *Asia Journal of Theology* 22, no. 2 (October 2008): 321.

in the world. Engagement in God’s great work gives real purpose and meaning to life, so much of which seems mundane, meaningless and small. This is true for every believer—the housewife bored with life, the unemployed construction worker, the young man battling addiction, the young woman struggling with image issues, the businessman overwhelmed by work—for each of them there is something greater going on in their lives, a greater truth, a richer reality, a more noble struggle in which they have an active part. As the pastor helps the Christian understand his identity in Jesus, he also helps him find purpose in the work of bringing the word of Jesus’ reconciliation to the world.

For the Christian to rightly understand who he is, he must find his identity in these objective truths about who he is in Christ. With all the things the Christian may want to do, or feel compelled to do, he must keep clear in his mind who he is in Christ. When he forgets who he is in Christ, the Christian often returns to the “spirit of slavery leading to fear” (Rom. 8:15), seeking to justify himself by his own righteousness to a distant and austere God. By remembering who he is in Christ, he can find peace and strength knowing that he is justified and righteous in Christ and freely obey God knowing his feeble attempts please a loving and caring Heavenly Father. The pastor’s work is to remind those Christians in his care—over and over again—of the objective realities that are true of them in Christ, who they are in Christ and the great work in which they have the privilege to play a part.

The Christian’s Identity in Christ: Subjective

The objective realities of the Christian’s identity in Christ never change, never waiver and never fade. Out of these objective realities, flow the Christian’s subjective experience. The subjective experiences of the Christian’s identity in Christ do vary and change and are enjoyed to a greater or lesser degree due in part to the response of the individual. This

relationship is analogous to a marriage; the man and women are objectively married, yet they will experience the joys and blessings of the marriage only in as much as they are committed to and actively working to improve and support that marriage. Similarly, though the Christian is in Christ and therefore unalterably connected to the blessings of God, he will experience those blessings and the fruit of righteousness and peace only in as much as he is actively giving himself up as a “living and holy sacrifice” (Rom. 12:1) to the Lord.

The Christian life is a life of purpose. His citizenship in the new creation comes with the responsibility to be a profitable and useful member of the kingdom. Every Christian has been crafted by God, in Christ Jesus, for the purpose of good works. Paul wrote in Ephesians 2:10, “For we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand so that we would walk in them.” The objective and subjective come together in this verse. God is the one who crafted the believer, designing and equipping him to do good works. He objectively works in them “both to will and to work” (Phil. 2:13), but the believer is the one that walks in the good works, the one who subjectively and experientially does the will of God. This is the work of sanctification, whereby God objectively works in the life of the believer so that he is changed, becoming more righteous in his thoughts, feelings and behavior, and therefore more useful to God.

The pastor must be careful not to misapply the objective realities of the Christian’s identity in Christ. Their application should never result in laziness or licentiousness, nor are they intended to build up self-esteem. The pastor should apply the objective realities of identity in Christ in a way that encourages the Christian to value the work of Christ Jesus more and pushes the Christian deeper and deeper into commitment to Jesus and obedience to his Word. In other words, the objective realities should be presented in such a way that it promotes a richer experience of the subjective realities of the Christian’s identity in Christ.

The Christian is actively being changed and molded because of that spiritual union. This section will discuss the pastoral application of the Christian's identity in Christ to the Christian's subjective experience.

In Christ the Christian Is Filled with the Holy Spirit

Being filled with the Holy Spirit more significantly impacts the believer's subjective experience than any other benefit of being united to Christ. The indwelling of the Holy Spirit is the most significant bridge between objective truth and subjective reality. Pastors can encourage Christians that they are being changed because they have the Holy Spirit working in them. Paul wrote in Romans 8:11, "But if the Spirit of Him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, He who raised Christ Jesus from the dead will also give life to your mortal bodies through His Spirit who dwells in you." The subjective experience of the Christian will be impacted—he will be changed—because the Spirit of God fills him. That Spirit brings spiritual life, making the believer a new creature, giving him a new identity; one which was created for good works.

Paul pictured the Spirit indwelling the believer for a very specific reason. He wrote concerning the gifts given by the Spirit in 1 Corinthians 12: 7, "But to each one is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good." Through union with Christ, each Christian bears a manifestation of the Holy Spirit. Each Christian's manifestation is unique and impacts his subjective experience in ways specifically meaningful to him, but the common element is that the spiritual gifts are always expressed in ways that build up the church. Simon Kistemaker put it succinctly, "The Spirit's presence in the life of the believer serves

the common good of the entire community.”⁷⁶ In Christ the believer’s identity is subjectively impacted by the objective reality that the Holy Spirit is working in him to form him into a useful tool for the building of God’s kingdom. The Christian’s subjective experience is molded into usefulness because of the indwelling of the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit is the agent through which the spiritual changes take place.

In Christ the Christian Is Strengthened

Paul was keenly aware of his own weakness apart from the strengthening of Christ’s Spirit. In 2 Corinthians Paul wrote very personally about his sense of weakness and need. However, Paul turned that experience of weakness into a greater dependence on the power of Christ working in him through the Holy Spirit. In one poignant passage, Paul described the greatness of the revelation that God gave to him (2 Cor. 12:1-6), the accompanying “thorn in the flesh,” to keep him humble (vs. 7) and his prayers for the thorn to be removed (vs. 8). Christ responded, “My grace is sufficient for you, for power is perfected in weakness” (vs. 9). Paul internalized this reality and responded, “Most gladly, therefore, I will rather boast about my weakness, so that the power of Christ may dwell in me” (vs. 9). And again, “Therefore I am well content with weakness . . . for Christ’s sake; for when I am weak, then I am strong” (vs. 10). Paul grasped that Christ working through his weakness did not demean him for being weak, but rather it exalted Christ for being strong.

Paul famously wrote in Philippians 4:13, “I can do all things through Him who strengthens me.” Paul wrote this in the context of learning to be content in every

⁷⁶ Simon Kistemaker, *Exposition of the First Epistle to the Corinthians*, New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1993), 420.

circumstance, “both of having abundance and suffering need” (vs. 12). Paul was able to be content in those circumstances, to not grumble or steal when hungry and not become complacent when full, because Christ strengthened him. Notice that Paul was not writing about what one might call great works of righteousness. Paul was simply talking about learning to be content. But for Paul even his progress in the seemingly simple act of being content was only possible because he was being strengthened by Christ. Even the most basic acts and attitudes of righteousness are impossible apart from the strength of Christ.

In Ephesians 6: 10-17, Paul wrote of putting on spiritual armor. Donna Reinhard made the interesting observation, “Based upon the way Paul introduces each attribute of the armor in Ephesians, each piece of Armor is a divine gift; he equates "putting on Christ" with ‘putting on spiritual armor’”⁷⁷ Indeed, before listing the various pieces of armor, Paul wrote, “Finally, be strong in the Lord and in the strength of His might” (vs.10) as if putting on the armor was describing how to put on the strength of Christ or how to subjectively experience the strengthening of God through union with Christ. Ephesians begins by connecting union with Christ to all the blessings of God to the believer (Eph. 1:3-14), and it is compelling to consider that Paul uses the analogy of armor to illustrate the Holy Spirit’s strengthening of the Christian in Christ as he draws his letter to a close. The Christian is able to enter into the battle of the Christian life because he is strengthened by Christ.

This is vital for pastoral application; Christians are not called to obedience and holiness from the wellspring of their own moral fortitude, they are called into union with Christ who displays his strength in the Christians’ weakness. However, pastors need to be

⁷⁷ Donna Reinhard, “Ephesians 6:10-18: A Call to Personal Piety or Another Way of Describing Union with Christ?,” *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 48, no. 3 (September 2005): 530.

careful to remind the Christian about the nature of this strength. The strength that Christ provides is *spiritual* strength. Strength is often sought after so that individuals can be more independent, to need others less and be freer to act on one's own. However, spiritual strength effects the opposite result; it actually makes the individual more *dependent* on Christ. This can be confusing for Christians, but it is important to understand that being strengthened by Christ and to experience his power means to need him more. Pastors should also remind Christians that this spiritual strength is part of their subjective identity; strength will rise as the believer responds with faith and that strength will fall as the believer responds with fear and disobedience.

In Christ's strength the Christian is able to obey, but the Christian must still exert effort and will to obey. He must use the strength that Christ fully provides to make progress in righteousness. Pastors should remind the Christian of his identity in Christ while encouraging fuller obedience and greater faith. When the Christian is focused on Christ's strength in him, he is free to strive hard after righteousness. Every act of obedience and every victory over sin becomes, then, an opportunity to boast of what Christ has done and to glorify him for his strength.

In Christ the Christian Increases in Righteousness

Paul taught that through union with Christ, Christians are being made more and more like Jesus, they become more righteous in their subjective experience. This is not the objectively imputed righteousness of Christ which makes the believer acceptable to a Holy God. This is the process of sanctification whereby Christ works through the Holy Spirit in the believer so that he experientially increases in righteousness. Paul wrote, "We are to grow up in all aspects into Him who is the head, even Christ" (Eph. 4:15). Every aspect of the

Christian is to grow up into Christ. As Christ is perfectly righteous, so the Christian becomes more righteous the more he grows up into Christ. Paul described this poetically in 2 Corinthians, where he wrote, “But we all, with unveiled face, beholding as in a mirror the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from glory to glory, just as from the Lord, the Spirit” (2 Cor. 3:18). It is only because the Christian is united with Christ and therefore with the Spirit that he can become more and more like Christ.

In Philippians 1:9-11, Paul recorded the content of his prayer for the Philippian Christians which illustrates the scope and source of this transformation. He wrote:

And this I pray, that your love may abound still more and more in real knowledge and all discernment, so that you may approve the things that are excellent, in order to be sincere and blameless until the day of Christ; having been filled with the fruit of righteousness which comes through Jesus Christ, to the glory and praise of God.

Here Paul prayed that the entire lives of the Philippian believers would be impacted and changed by their union with Christ. Paul wanted their emotions to be changed—“that your love may abound;” their minds to be changed—“real knowledge and all discernment, so that you may approve what is excellent;” and their actions to be changed—“in order to be sincere and blameless.” Paul summarized that this moral and ethical transformation of the entire person comes through Christ, through whom the believer is “filled with the fruit of righteousness.” This complete transformation is only possible because it “comes through Jesus Christ.”

Jesus, through the Holy Spirit, produces the fruit of righteousness and holiness in the believer, making him more Christ-like, but the Christian is not passive. He is actively involved too. Richard Melick brought these two elements together in his comments on Philippians 1:9-11, “The prayer was for them to live in such a way that Christ could work in them the harvest of morality and righteousness which would be acceptable at the day of

Christ.”⁷⁸ The way the Christian lives and responds to Christ has a real impact on the fruit of righteousness that Christ will work out in them. Objectively, Christ is working in every Christian to produce good works, but subjectively, that is accomplished by spiritually motivating and encouraging each believers to be more Christ-like, and therefore more actually righteous.

The pastor should take up Paul’s heart and prayers for his church. He must believe Christ is sanctifying each Christian, however slowly it may sometimes seem, and therefore urge them to a deeper relationship with Christ so that they will be filled with the fruits of righteousness. The pastor should remind believers under his care of the reality that Christ is at work in them, and that Christ is changing them which should motive them to greater effort themselves. The motivation for pursuing holiness is not guilt or a misplaced sense of duty, rather it is a joyful freedom. Each Christian can be the holy, righteous and good person they deeply desire to be because Christ is in him and Christ produces the fruit. Duty is real and sometimes needs to be emphasized, but the primary motivator for the weary Christian to obey, and to obey joyfully, is the reality that he is not alone in the struggle. The objective reality, that the loving Father who saved him and united him with his Son and is spiritually working in him to live in a way that brings real and lasting blessing and joy, has radical implications for the subjective experience of the believer as he fights sin and strives to be more Christ-like.

⁷⁸ Melick, 67.

In Christ the Christian Is Given a Christ-Like Disposition

Union with Christ not only impacts the way a believer acts, but also transforms the believer's emotions and attitudes as well. Christians are commanded to feel certain ways, for example, to love and to not fear. The Bible makes it clear that emotions have a moral element to them. Although there is certainly some overlap, those moral elements of emotion fall more into the previous section; that is, believers are being transformed to emote more righteously as they are transformed into the image of Christ in every aspect of their lives. The focus of this section will be to explore the dispositional transformation wrought by union with Christ, how union with Christ produces a Christ-like disposition.

The characteristic or defining disposition of Christ is love. One cannot rightly consider the emotional disposition of Jesus and not notice first and foremost the amazing love of God in Jesus Christ. While Paul does not directly link union with Christ to the love of Christ in any one text, the inference will be shown to be reasonable. Those who are not united to Christ cannot love like Christ. For those who are united with Christ, their experience of his love motivates their interaction with the world. As Paul wrote in 2 Corinthians 5:14, "The love of Christ controls us" Murray Harris commented, "Christ's love is a compulsive force in the life of believers, a dominating power that effectively eradicates choice in that it leaves them no option but to live for God" ⁷⁹ The believer, united with Christ, is so subjectively impacted by the love of Christ for him that it controls him and motivates him. His disposition has been permanently altered to one that loves like Christ.

Paul also described this disposition of love as something that grows in the believer through his union with Christ. This is most clearly seen in the fruit of the Spirit (Gal. 5:22),

⁷⁹ Harris, 419.

the first of which is love. As the Spirit is given to the believer through union with Christ, the Spirit then works to produce in the believer a Christ-like love. Thus, the believer is controlled and motivated by the love of Christ for him and by the Spirit-borne fruit of Christ-like love within him. And thus he has a Christ-like disposition of love as he interacts with the world and the unbelievers in it.

However, the world often does not respond well to being loved with Christ-like love; indeed, the Christian often endures suffering. Christ told his disciples that the world would hate them as it had hated him; he told them of coming persecution because he did not want them to be surprised or made to stumble by it (John 15:18-16:1). How then is the believer to respond to persecution? By conforming his mind to Christ's mind, by adopting Christ's disposition toward suffering. Jesus told his disciples that they were blessed when they were persecuted and reviled for his sake, and he encouraged them to respond with joy and gladness knowing that they have a reward in heaven (Matt. 5:10-12). Paul, unified to Christ and enabled by Christ, demonstrated this Christ-like attitude toward suffering as a lasting example to the church.

When Paul was converted, his disposition was radically changed. Having been a persecutor of the church who hated Christ and all he taught, he became the great missionary of the church, laying down his life to spread the hope of the good news of Jesus as far as he could go. Paul's disposition of love for a lost world put him on a collision course with suffering. Practically everywhere he went for the cause of Christ he suffered to one degree or another. Yet even as Paul faced his own death, he found joy because he knew that "in the future there is laid up for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous Judge, will award to me on that day; and not only to me, but also to all who have loved His appearing" (2 Tim. 4:8). This eschatological hope put all of his suffering in context, so that

he could write, “The sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory that is to be revealed in us” (Rom. 8:18). Paul further explained, “We suffer with [Christ] so that we may also be glorified with Him” (Rom. 8:17). To be united with Christ is to be united with his suffering, but it is also to be united with his glorification. Thus, compelled by Christ-like love to preach the gospel and live righteously, Paul suffered, but not without hope.

This joy and hope were not only for Paul, but for “all who have loved His appearing.” This Christ-like disposition of joy in suffering for the sake of Christ and his gospel should be the regular experience of the Christian. For example, early in his letter to the Philippians, Paul described Philippian believers as ones to whom, “it has been granted for Christ’s sake, not only to believe in Him, but also to suffer for His sake”(1:29). Not only had God given them salvation, he had also given them suffering; they were called to suffer for Christ. Yet only a few paragraphs later in Chapter 3, Paul called the Philippians to “rejoice in the Lord” (3:1). Though they are called to suffer in Christ, yet they are also the ones enabled to fulfill the command of God and rejoice in the Lord. To Paul’s renewed mind, thinking with the disposition of Christ toward suffering, these were not incompatible truths.

Paul continued in Philippians 3 to illustrate how suffering and joy can be juxtaposed in the life of the believer using his own life as an example. He explained that he had “suffered the loss of all things” (vs. 8) so that he could have Christ, because of the “surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord” (vs.8). He counted all things as rubbish in order to “know Him and the power of His resurrection and the fellowship of His sufferings, being conformed to His death; in order that I may attain to the resurrection from the dead” (vss. 10-11). William Hendrickson clarified Paul’s motivation, “When he expresses his yearning to know Christ, he has in mind...especially the sharing of certain

experiences with him.”⁸⁰ Knowing Christ and his power, experientially having fellowship with Christ in his sufferings by being conformed to his death—these were so valuable to Paul, that they provided a foundation for him to have real joy even in the presence of real suffering. Only a few verses later, Paul again exhorted the Philippians, “Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, rejoice” (4:4).

This is part of the of the identity a Christian is given in Christ, a renewed, Christ-like disposition toward love and the suffering that often comes about because of it. The love of Christ is a joyful motivator to go into the world and suffer. Pastors should remind Christians to love as they were loved. Believers need to be reminded that God is currently pouring out love in their hearts so that they will bear fruit. The example of God’s love to them and the love growing in their hearts should cause believers to interact with the world in ways that sometimes lead to suffering for the sake of Christ and for the sake of the lost. When pressed into suffering because of the love of Christ, the Christian comes to know more of Christ and more of his love. In such suffering there can be real rejoicing, a joy that comes from knowing the Lord better and growing in fellowship with him.

Objectively, the Christian’s identity is rooted in Christ and his work on the Christian’s behalf; yet subjectively, the Holy Spirit applies these realities to the Christian, causing real spiritual changes in him that impact his subjective, daily experience. The pastor must often remind the Christian that who he is in Christ has a powerful subjective element as well. The Christian’s response to objective truth impacts how he experiences the blessing, usefulness and joy that come from the Spirit working in his life. The pastor in preaching and

⁸⁰ William Hendriksen, *Exposition of Philippians*, New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1962), 167.

counseling should often be reminding those Christians in his care of who they are in Christ and what Christ is doing in them, for the purpose of encouraging them to respond more fully with faith and obedience.

The Christian's Responsibility in Christ

The Christian's identity in Christ impacts the whole person both objectively and subjectively. This new identity brings the Christian into an exalted position, but in that position he is called to a whole-person obedience. Paul reminded the Corinthian Christians that they are not their own anymore; they have been "bought with a price" (1 Cor. 6:19-20). Paul further explained that union with Christ means the Christian is a "slave of righteousness" (Rom. 6:18) and a slave of Christ (1 Cor. 7:22, Eph. 6:6). Indeed, the Christian is to offer up his entire self as a sacrifice to God holding nothing back (Rom. 12:1). Through union with Christ the Christian receives a plethora of blessings and promises, whereby he is not only able but also responsible to become increasingly useful and obedient to Christ.

Paul did not consider being united to Christ a static thing. Certainly there are one-time elements to union with Christ, but Paul wrote of that union as a living thing requiring continual investment and maintenance, not out of fear that it would dissolve but because of its great value. As union with Christ is the center of the Christian's identity, thus, the most basic aspect of the Christian's responsibility is to seek more of Christ. Writing autobiographically, Paul declared, "Not that I have already obtained it or have already become perfect, but I press on so that I may lay hold of that for which also I was laid hold of by Christ Jesus" (Phil. 3:12). Two verses later he wrote, "I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus." Despite all of Paul's obedience and

suffering for Christ's sake, he did not feel that he could sit back and relax, but the more he knew Christ, the more he was compelled to press on to know him even more.

According to Paul, every aspect of the Christian's life must be brought into line with the commands of Christ because every facet of the believer is in Christ. Thus, Paul gave commands about personal attitudes (ex. be humble, Phil 2:1-11). In Ephesians 5 and 6, Paul dispensed commands concerning the relationships and duties of families and instructions concerning work. Paul commanded believers to pray (Eph. 6:18, 1 Thess. 5:17-18) and to meditate on the Word of Christ (Col. 3:16, Eph. 6:17). The new identity in Christ so radically and completely alters the individual's life that every area of life must be reexamined and brought into obedience to Christ. The whole person is brought into union with Christ and the whole person is called to obey.

Paul summarized this idea with the language of putting on Christ (Rom. 13:14). As William Hendriksen wrote:

[Putting on Christ] means that, having accepted Christ and having been baptized, believers should now not rest on their laurels, but should continue to do in practice what they have already done in principle (Gal. 3:27). Paul is, as it were, saying, 'Having laid aside the garment of sin, now deck yourselves more and more with the robe of Christ's righteousness, so that whenever Satan reminds you of your sinfulness, you immediately remind him and yourselves of your new standing with God.'⁸¹

As one puts on clothing, so the Christian is to put on Christ, his attitudes, actions and thoughts, in order to live outwardly the inward reality of being united to Christ. In Christ the believer has been given all that he needs in order to obey. He has been given the strength, will and disposition, through the Holy Spirit, to follow Christ. The believer has been given

⁸¹ Hendriksen, 443-44.

immeasurable blessings in Christ, but with all those benefits comes a weighty responsibility. When the Christian fails to act in obedience or works at cross purposes to Christ, he grieves the Holy Spirit (Eph. 4:30) and sometimes causes the word of God to be blasphemed (Titus 2:5). Todd Billings summed up this idea, “‘Do not grieve the Holy Spirit,’ like ‘put on the Lord Jesus Christ’ (Rom. 13:14), is an imperative to live into the God-given identity that Christians have already received in Christ.”⁸² Union with Christ whets the believer’s appetite for more of Christ, more seeking Christ, more walking in Christ, more putting on Christ. Being in Christ is a great privilege, but it is also a great responsibility; it is a life that requires complete obedience to Christ.

The responsibilities of being in Christ would totally overwhelm the Christian if he were trying to satisfy them in his own power. However, in Christ the Spirit is at work in the Christian to “will and to work” (Phil. 2:13). The Christian does not work alone. Rather, he is enabled by the Holy Spirit through Christ. Christian children are called to obey, in Christ. Christian parents are called to parent, in Christ. Christian workers are called to work faithfully, in Christ. Christians are called to put sin to death, in Christ, even sins that they love and cherish and sometimes feel like they cannot live without. Only with the help of Christ and the Spirit can the Christian heed the call to love, to purity and to holiness. Only by grace can he obey the commands to behave, to believe, to feel and to think according to his new identity in Christ.

God has the right to demand obedience from his children, and as the imperatives come down hard, the objective reality of who they are in Christ bolsters them with hope for success and motivation to press on. It is in part the pastor’s role to remind his people of these

⁸² Billings, 48.

truths as he admonishes them toward holiness. He should remind them of the prizes for which they strive; in the present, pleasing God, vanquishing sin and knowing Christ more deeply, to name a few; and in the future the reward of the Father's well done and eternity with Christ. Additionally, the pastor can apply God's commands evangelistically, showing sinners their spiritual deadness and their desperate need to be in Christ. Against this backdrop, the pastor can freely offer the spiritual life found only in the gospel.

The pastor should remind believers that their obedience or lack thereof is directly connected to the vibrancy of their life in Christ. He can encourage the Christian walking in communion with Christ and delighting in opportunities to obey and put on Christ that such obedience will be rewarded with even deeper communion with God. But on the other hand, the wandering or weak Christian needs to be reminded that only through obedient communion with God can he fulfill the responsibilities that come with sonship and experience the joy and peace of his identity in Christ. Placing obedience in the context of putting on Christ and of union with Christ turns the focus from the individual's own attempts at obedience toward the goal of knowing Christ better through obedience.

The pastor can also apply this truth as a helpful warning for those that persist in wandering from the safe path of Christ. While continually offering the free grace of Jesus and calling for repentance, the pastor must gently press home that a persistently faithless response to the commands and entreaties of Christ may prove there never has been real union with Christ at all. The pastor will not know the real spiritual state of those in his care, but he can always call people to turn in faith to Christ, to respond to the commands of the gospel with faith. This is the constant response of those already in Christ—they are always putting on Christ—and this is the initial response of those outside of Christ. It is always good and safe to keep calling all to come to Christ.

The Christian's Assurance in Christ

Although not yet directly addressed, the reasons for the Christian's assurance have largely been discussed previously in the paper. The believer can be assured of salvation because the work is all of Christ. As a pastor deals with weak saints, especially those with very tender consciences, he must turn their focus away from their own weakness and towards what Christ has done in and for them. Believers do not earn salvation or keep salvation by their works. Even their ability to believe is a gift from God. Thus, if they truly believe and trust in Christ, God has indeed given them the free gift of salvation.

John Frame boiled this down to the most basic level. He wrote, "If you can honestly say, 'I am trusting in Jesus for my salvation, not my own works, not my family, not my church, but Jesus,' then you can say without a doubt that you are saved."⁸³ Certainly there are times when actions need to be carefully examined, which Dr. Frame acknowledged when he wrote, "If we see ourselves dominated by sinful patterns, we should ask whether we have really trusted Christ as *Lord* and Savior."⁸⁴ If someone claims to believe in Jesus, but resolutely refuses to repent of or acknowledge sinful behavior, then his profession of faith must be questioned. For the one truly united with Christ, assurance is not an excuse for lawlessness, but a liberation from fear to follow Christ more fully and more joyfully.

Fear is the opposite disposition of assurance. The Christian seeking to earn his own salvation, even if he is not consciously doing so, will begin to fear every failure, every breach

⁸³ John Frame, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Christian Belief* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2013), 1005.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*

of God's law. Since failure is inevitable, the works focused believer tends to become distant from the savior he is disappointing and to lose enthusiasm for obedience since he is failing. Often, the believer in this position will either redefine obedience into something humanly manageable (such as the Pharisees did in Jesus' time) or give up and leave the faith entirely. The pastor should be helping all those saints in his care to see that they do not have a "spirit of slavery leading to fear again, but a spirit of adoption as sons" (Rom. 8:15). The Christian is not a fear driven slave to the law, because he is a son of God. The Christian's objective identity in Christ is the greatest source of comfort for the believer struggling with assurance. The pastor must remind the insecure believer that he has been chosen by Christ, forgiven by Christ's death, given the righteousness of Christ, justified in Christ, adopted as God's son in Christ, made an heir with Christ. All of these things were done to him! None of them is dependent upon any input of work from the believer. Christ has done it all. The pastor must teach the self-focused believer to look at Christ and to Christ and feed his faith in Christ as the only way to attain assurance and peace and inspire love. He must remind the believer that his works adds nothing to his salvation and that in fact his attempts to obey delight God.

Based on Paul's example, pastors should be more ready to encourage assurance than to question it, to foster assurance than to threaten it. Paul dealt with wayward churches not as apostate but as fellowships of Christian brothers. For example, Paul addressed the Corinthian church as "those who have been sanctified in Christ Jesus, saints by calling" (1 Cor. 1:2); yet later passages in the letter reveal that some were struggling with immorality (5:1, 6:15-20), bringing lawsuits against one another (6:1) and getting drunk at the Lord's Supper (11:21). In response to this Paul only demanded those who were committing the most egregious sins to be cast out (5:5). For the rest, he reminded them of who they are in Christ (6:6), and then he demanded that they stop sinning, turn from their sin, and glorify

God (6:12-20). Rather than demanding that they reevaluate whether or not they were Christians because of their failures, he returned their attention to who they are in Christ and showed them how to be reconciled to Christ.

This does not mean that less egregious, unrepented sins should never be the cause for considering someone's profession false, only that the general tenor of Paul's writings assumed the best. This promotes assurance, encourages faith and presses the believer deeper into union with Christ. Following this example, pastors should be encouraging more than discouraging. Pastors should be reluctant to jump to the worst conclusion and keep encouraging until clear evidence reveals that a professing Christian is really an unbeliever.

Promoting assurance points people to what Christ has done and turns them away from themselves. It focuses on their union with Christ rather than their remaining sin. The fear, of course, is that this will lead to laziness and sin, but the pastor must believe that God really is at work in the believer, that union with Christ really does completely, radically change the identity of the believer. Thus believing, the pastor can confidently foster assurance in Christ and boldly press the Christian on to total obedience and submission to Christ.

The Church's Identity in Christ

Relatively few of Paul's letters were written to individuals. Only the pastoral letters to Timothy and Titus and the letter to Philemon were primarily written to a single recipient, and even those letters have some indications that they were meant to be read to the entire church. Much more often Paul was clearly writing to entire churches. As churches are made up of individuals united to Christ through faith, it is vital that these individuals personally respond and live out that identity. Yet it must be acknowledged that Paul was not writing to solitary individuals but to believers in church communities.

Paul taught that as individuals are united with Christ they are brought into fellowship with other local Christians, into churches. Individually they are united to Christ and corporately, through that shared union, believers are brought into union with each other. Paul wrote, “So we, who are many, are one body in Christ, and individually members one of another” (Rom. 12:5). The life of the Christian is a life lived in community, a spiritual fellowship of believers working together for the good of each other for the glory of God. Just as the individual’s identity is dominated by his union with Christ, so the church should corporately have a self-identity of being the body of Christ, a body which exists only because it is united to Christ.

The pastor has a responsibility not only to nurture the individual’s union with Christ but also to promote the corporate union with Christ. As the word of God is brought to bear on the congregation, the pastor must remember that many of the commands in the New Testament are corporate commands which the church is to obey together. Therefore, the pastor should often emphasize the corporate identity of togetherness in Christ. Together the church is being built up in Christ and together the church is pushing out into the world in Christ.

Together the Church Is Built Up in Christ

Paul used many analogies to describe the church and its function, one of which is the building analogy found in Ephesians. In Ephesians 2:19-21, Paul reminded the Ephesian Christians that they were “of God’s household having been built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus Himself being the corner stone, in whom the whole building, being fitted together, is growing into a holy temple in the Lord.” This pictures the

Christian church as the new temple of God, built upon the cornerstone of Christ. Harold Hoehner, helped explain the cornerstone imagery:

The Cornerstone was the most important stone in the whole building. All other stones were to be in line with it. Christ himself is the living cornerstone and the apostles and the prophets who make up the rest of the foundation needed to be correctly aligned with Christ. All other succeeding believers are built on that foundation, causing their lives to be measured with Christ.⁸⁵

As each individual believer is united to Christ through personal faith in him, they are cemented together into the house that God is building for himself. This work will continue until the last brick is laid and the house is complete.

Unity

Intrinsic to the image of the church as a building is a picture of unity in diversity. Each unique block is added to complete the one building. In the context of Ephesians 2, Paul was explaining the great mystery that the Gentiles had become “partakers of the promise in Christ Jesus” (vs. 6). The image is of Gentiles being added to Jewish believers and together building up the temple of God. Paul was even more explicit in Galatians 3:28, “There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free man, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus.” The primary and defining characteristic of all the different types of Christians is that they are one in Christ. All other distinctions are pushed into the background. This does not wipe out individuality or even the real differences between Christians. In fact, Paul himself emphasized some of these differences in other letters (1 Cor. 14:34, I Tim. 2: 9-15). However, this primary distinction of being in Christ

⁸⁵ Harold W. Hoehner, *Ephesians: An Exegetical Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2002), 407.

supersedes all the differences. From the vast variety of humanity, individuals are being brought into Christ as equals before God and joined into one church body.

In order for the pastor to encourage corporate church unity based on mutual union with Christ, he must foster a culture of acceptance and openness. In his own heart first, he must root out any bigotry or racism. He must open his eyes to the beauty of God's diverse human creation and wonder at God's work in building his church from such diverse people.

As R. B. Kuiper wrote:

As the human body derives its beauty from the variety of its members, so does the body of Christ. When love rises above uniformity and embraces multiformity, the greatest of Christian virtues comes to glorious expression.⁸⁶

Ideally, the local church will reflect all the diversity of the community in which it resides.

This displays more fully to the watching world the reality of unity that exists in the body of Christ.

God is building one church. It is sin within the church that tears it into small isolated pockets. All too often, small, relatively inconsequential issues disrupt a church's unity and cause churches to rupture and divide. The pastor may only have influence in a small congregation, but wherever he is, he can encourage unity by promoting true humility. As Paul wrote, "regard one another as more important than yourselves" (Phil. 2:3). So many of the bad reasons for separating are caused by demanding a preference or discarding the desires of others. How much more unity would there be if the church could really get a handle on Christ-like humility?

⁸⁶ R.B. Kuiper, *The Glorious Body of Christ* (Reprint Edinburgh, UK: Banner of Truth Trust, 1967), 45.

Unity is not uniformity, and the pursuit of unity should not terminate in uniformity. Uniformity is the world's way of gathering, like with like. Within Christ's church, unity amid diversity is the truest expression of how God draws people from every tribe and tongue, uniting them in a common savior to worship himself. When people of different ages, races, tastes and preferences worship God together, it is a powerful testimony of how God builds his church by reconciling people to himself and to each other.

Love

For unity to exist, the love of Christ in the church must overwhelm the sinful prejudices and ideas that divide. As Kuiper noted, love must overcome the natural instinct toward uniformity and embrace multiformity; only then will a church attain true unity and glorify God⁸⁷ Paul, recognizing this reality, emphasized the role of love in the church. He admonished the Colossian church, "Beyond all these things put on love, which is the perfect bond of unity" (Col. 3:14). Because of the vital role love has in binding the church together, Paul gave a considerable amount of space in his letters to discussing the nature and characteristics of this love in the church.

As pastors teach through the various passages on love in the Bible, they should certainly make application to individuals but also be careful not to overlook corporate applications in order to promote a corporate identity and a corporate culture of love and unity. The seminal passage on love, 1 Corinthians 13, is given in the context of the church's application of spiritual gifts (1 Cor. 12-14). Paul exhorted believers to exercise spiritual gifts within a culture and context of love, else their gift is worthless. It is love that promotes

⁸⁷ Ibid.

patience and kindness and reins in the arrogance to which giftedness may lead (1 Cor. 13:4). It is love that directs the use of gifts to serve others instead of seeking one's own and to serve even when being mistreated (vs 5). It is love that "bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things" (vs. 7). Despite the different callings, different interests and different ministries of individuals in the church, such love binds the church together in Christ.

In Ephesians 4 and 5, Paul gave detailed and specific instructions on how believers should live and serve together in the church. He began by calling his readers to:

walk in a manner worthy of the calling with which you have been called with all humility and gentleness, with patience, showing tolerance for one another in love, being diligent to preserve the bond of unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. (4:1)

Clearly, diligent preservation of Spirit initiated unity is part of living as a Christian worthy of his calling. And closely connected to and accompanying the preservation of unity are the virtues of "humility," "gentleness," "patience," and "showing tolerance for one another in love." Note how closely these virtues resemble the love defined in 1 Corinthians 13. In Christian love, the church is built up into peaceful unity in Christ (Eph. 4:13).

Spiritual Gifts

One aspect of the diversity within the church is the diversity of gifts. The church that is being built up in Christ is built up with many members serving many different purposes. Paul used the image of a body's many parts to demonstrate the diversity found within a single church. Paul wrote in Romans 12:4-5, "For just as we have many members in one body and all the members do not have the same function, so we, who are many, are one body in Christ, and individually members one of another." Each member is distinct and different. Each member has a different function to perform in the body. Each member's role is vital.

Using the same image of a body in 1 Corinthians 12, Paul added that “to each one is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good” (vs. 7). The Spirit of God is specifically working in each member of the church so that he will be used for the good of the whole, for the building up of the church.

Paul listed many different spiritual gifts in both passages, but his point is not so much the specific gifts as the difference among the gifts. Such a great variety of gifts exist within one church. Paul also argued against the notion that some members of the church are less valuable because their spiritual gifts are not as prominent or exalted as the gifts of others (1 Cor. 12:14-26, Rom. 12:3). Paul refocused these discontent believers on the God who gave the gifts instead of the gifts themselves. He wrote, “But now God has placed the members, each one of them, in the body, just as He desired” (1 Cor. 12:18). God is the one building the church by gifting his people as he knows is best.

Gifts are given to believers, “not according to their relative merits, nor in virtue of their own selection, but as God wills and orders.”⁸⁸ A gift by definition is something given, not earned. It is the mark of childish logic to be puffed up by what has been received through no effort of one’s own. Anthony Thiselton asked pointedly, “How dare anyone either boast or exult in his or her own gifts as if these were a status symbol, or devalue other people’s gifts, as if God had not chosen them for the other?”⁸⁹ The gifts are given for the building up of the church, not the puffing up of individuals.

⁸⁸ Charles Hodge, *An Exposition of the First Epistle to the Corinthians* (Reprint, Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1969), 257.

⁸⁹ Thiselton, 1004.

This does not mean that there is not gradation of honor and value attached to the various gifts. Some gifts are rightly valued more highly than others—hence the ongoing temptation to boast of receiving the greater gifts. Paul acknowledged this range of gifts when he encouraged believers to “earnestly desire the greater gifts” (I Cor. 12:31). It is right to honor those God has gifted in remarkable ways because of their value to the church (1 Tim. 5:17). However, it is never right to puff one’s self up or look down on another who has a lesser gift. Paul clearly wrote that even the weaker members are very necessary to God’s work in the church (1 Cor. 12: 22). The body of Christ is designed by God with strong and weak members, more and less gifted members, honorable and less honorable members, which are all are working together according to God’s plan for God’s purpose of building and growing his church.

The pastor should endeavor to create and nurture a strong culture of unity within the reality of diversity. Leading by example, he must value every member of his church and consciously appreciate every gift that God has given to the church. Through his example and teaching he should promote a culture of Christ-like love that is more interested in serving others rather than being served. The more the church finds its identity in Christ, in his love and in his sacrifice, the more the church will grow in usefulness, using all its gifts for the good of the whole. The more love conquers prejudice, the more personal interests are subjected to other’s interests, the deeper real unity in diversity will become.

Baptism and the Lord’s Supper

Baptism and the Lord’s Supper are two dramatic ordinances given to the New Testament church to act out or picture the realities of corporate life in Christ. While both picture truths relevant to the individual, these two ceremonies are also corporate expressions

of union with Christ. They are important parts of the life of the church, experienced and witnessed together as a church. Rightly used, these two ordinances can build up and encourage the church's corporate sense of being united with Christ together.

In baptism, the church witnesses an individual coming into the visible church. What has taken place spiritually in the individual is dramatized outwardly in the washing with water. Paul wrote that those baptized into Christ were buried with Christ so that they could rise to new life in Christ (Rom. 6:3-7, Col 2:9-15). This symbolizes the dying of the old life and the birth of the new life in Christ. Paul wrote in another place that those that had been baptized had "clothed [themselves] with Christ" (Gal. 3:27). While baptism is principally focused on the individual, Paul also applied it to the corporate body when he wrote, "We were all baptized into one body . . ." (1 Cor. 12:13).

Indeed, the drama played out in a public baptism is helpful in cultivating the corporate identity in Christ. As the individual goes through the ceremony he can physically experience the spiritual reality of dying to self and rising alive in Christ, being united with Christ and through Christ to the visible church he is joining. Those watching can remember their own baptisms, recalling how their own lives are inexorably connected to Christ as well as to the believers they sit with and the newly baptized convert. They are together dead to self and together alive in Christ and together striving toward the final resurrection from the dead. Truly, baptism should be a time of corporate joy and an intensification of their corporate identity, of being together united with Christ.

Whereas baptism testifies of the believer's entrance into new life in Christ, the Lord's Supper dramatizes the believer's real need to constantly be vitally connected to Christ. As food and drink preserve life in the human body, so spiritually the Christian is totally dependent on Christ to live. John Frame wrote, "Our present nourishment comes by feeding

on Christ . . . and by a closer relationship with others in the body”⁹⁰ Again, this drama of feeding on Christ is not primarily focused on the individual; it is a corporate sharing of a meal. Paul wrote:

Is not the cup of blessing which we bless a sharing in the blood of Christ? Is not the bread which we break a sharing in the body of Christ? Since there is one bread, we who are many are one body; for we all partake of the one bread. (1 Cor. 10:16)

The Lord’s Supper should be a time of corporate sharing of Christ, of feeding on Christ. As individuals remember what Christ has done for them, they should also remember what Christ has done for every other believer sitting alongside them. They are in Christ together.

Both baptism and the Lord’s Supper are dramatic ordinances intended to build up the corporate sense of union with Christ. The tendency may often be to focus only inwardly and individually during these ordinances. The pastor must also thoughtfully turn the attention of the church to what God is doing among them corporately in Christ. These two dramatic events are powerful testimonies to what God has done and continues to do in their midst. The beginning and the continuation of church life together in Christ is clearly displayed before them. The pastor’s role is to make sure they do not miss it. They are united to Christ together, united to one another, growing in love and expressing God’s gifts so the church continues to be built up in Christ.

Together the Church Is Pushing Outward in Christ

For Paul the doctrine of building up the church implies an outward movement of the church into the world. Indeed, the church is not only built up by current members becoming more Christ-like but also by sinners being converted and added to the church. However, Paul

⁹⁰ Frame, 1066.

did not make a direct connection between the church's identity in Christ and the church's responsibility to spread the gospel. Nor did Paul give specific instructions for the church regarding its own evangelistic efforts. This does not mean that he had nothing to say regarding the outward spread of the gospel. Truly, it would be unbalanced for the church's identity in Christ to be only inwardly focused. As the body of Christ, the church is united to Christ, and in its Christ-like character it has Christ's heart of love for the lost and a disposition to bring Christ's word of reconciliation to the lost (2 Cor. 5:19).

Paul did not give the church commands to obey regarding spreading the gospel, but he did praise the efforts of others and provide himself as an example for the churches to follow. In Paul's letter to the Thessalonians Paul recorded his commendation of their exemplary efforts. Paul wrote:

You also became imitators of us and of the Lord, having received the word in much tribulation with the joy of the Holy Spirit, so that you became an example to all the believers in Macedonia and in Achaia. For the word of the Lord has sounded forth from you, not only in Macedonia and Achaia, but also in every place your faith toward God has gone forth . . . (1 Thess. 1:6-8)

Notice the church became imitators of Paul and the Lord, and an example to other believers. They were exemplary primarily because of the way in which the "word of the Lord sounded forth" from them. Paul did not give details about how the word went out from them, but clearly they were commended for their outward focus for the sake of the gospel. The modern church in Christ Jesus should also be imitators of Paul, sounding forth the word of the Lord.

R. B. Kuiper wrote that, "The church's task is to teach and preach the Word of God. Whatever else it may properly do is subordinate and subsidiary to that task."⁹¹ Preaching is

⁹¹ Kuiper, 163.

the primary way the word of the Lord sounds forth. The Word of God should be openly taught and preached within the context of the church and in any venue open to the church as it has opportunity. As the body of Christ all the work of the church should be driven by proclaiming the teaching of Christ in Scripture. In all the benevolent outreaches of the church and in all the ways it attempts to engage its community, the church must not neglect to incorporate what is of most importance, the gospel message of Jesus.

Proclaiming the word of the Lord is the primary task of the church and its local community is the primary sphere of the church's activity. However, it is not the only sphere of the churches activity. Paul, on more than one occasion, asked for the churches to pray for the gospel going out to all the world. In 2 Thessalonians Paul wrote, "Pray for us that the word of the Lord will spread rapidly and be glorified . . ." (2 Thess. 3:1). In Ephesians he wrote, "Pray on my behalf, that utterance may be given to me, to make known with boldness the mystery of the gospel" (Eph. 6:19). Paul needed the prayers of the churches. The gospel is still going out across the world, and missionaries are still called to a life of sacrifice and suffering, still serving amidst opposition and adversity. And they still need the prayers of the church that the body of Christ might grow.

Prayers are not all that is needed. In Philippians 4:10-20, Paul commended the church for sending him support even when many other churches had not. The more the church sees itself as the body of Christ and sees itself connected first to Christ and then to all those in Christ, the more it will sense its real connection with the work of the gospel in the world. This is expressed through a culture of praying for and supporting missionaries. Pastors must keep reminding the church of what God is doing in the world. They must be aware, at least to some degree, of missionary efforts both local and abroad, and they should share those stories with the church, encouraging the church to pray for and provide for the

gospel to go out. Part of the culture of the body of Christ should be a deep concern for the spread of the gospel all over the world.

The church that is excited to see the gospel go out and the body of Christ built up as God draws sinners to new life in Christ Jesus, is the church that to a higher degree reflects its real identity in Christ. The church that loses sight of the work of God in the world and shrinks in on itself, is a church that is forgetting its real identity and forgetting that God will accomplish his purpose of building up his church in every land and nation.

This chapter has endeavored to present a model for how a pastor can approach his ministry and the people under his care. This has not attempted to be a practical model for every aspect of the work the pastor must do, but rather it has attempted to focus the pastor more on the work of Jesus in himself, in the Christians under his care, and in the church. This is a perspective for the pastor to remember that everything he is called to do and be, everything the Christians in his care are called to do and be, and even everything the corporate church is called to do and be is bound up in their identity in Christ. Because they are united to Christ and thereby able to do all that God has called them to do, the pastor can boldly proclaim all the requirements of the gospel, passionately press the church into obedience, and confidently lay his life down for his work knowing that in Christ God's will is being done.

CHAPTER 5

CONCLUSION

Paul's theology exalts the doctrine of union with Christ. This is a spiritual union whereby Christ associates himself with the Christian, mediates all the blessings of God to the Christian, and sends the Holy Spirit to indwell the Christian, bringing blessing, righteousness, strength and joy to the Christian. Truly, union with Christ effects a radical change of identity, so that the old man dies in Christ and a new creature rises in him. The objective and subjective realities of this new identity in Christ provide a framework for all the pastor's work in the church.

Laying out a framework for the pastor to apply, this paper first demonstrated the centrality of union with Christ through Paul's two perspectives on redemptive history. Most broadly, all of humanity is either in Christ or in Adam, either in Christ or not. There are no other possibilities. Only in Christ is there life. More narrowly, union with Christ in the New Covenant has altered the way people relate to God. In the Old Covenant the children of God were under the Law, their identity was found in keeping the Law and relating to God through that Law. Now, in the New Covenant, the covenantal use of the Law has been terminated and the believer finds his identity in union with Christ and relates to God through Christ.

Adding to the framework, this paper presented Paul's understanding of how union with Christ impacted the Christian's identity. Union with Christ is the work of the entire Trinity and impacts every aspect of the life and character of the individual united with Christ. The Christian's identity is so radically impacted by this union that Paul wrote of it as dying

with Christ. The believer's old, sin-enslaved identity is put to death on the cross with Christ, and the believer is raised to live a new life of righteousness in Christ. The scope of the impact of union with Christ on the individual's identity is total.

With the framework of the Christian's identity in Christ established, this paper then applied that framework to the pastoral ministry. Because union with Christ impacts the Christian's identity so pervasively, it colors every aspect of the pastor's ministry. It gives the pastor a right perspective with which to understand and balance his own work. It shapes the way he interacts with and instructs all the Christians under his care. Because of their new identity in Christ, he can urge them to take up their responsibilities in Christ and at the same time encourage their assurance in Christ. And because union with Christ is so fundamental to the identity of the church, the pastor can encourage the congregation as a whole to grow together, serve one another in love and look outward by bringing the word of reconciliation to the lost. This model has been gleaned from the writings of Paul as an aid to help pastors thoughtfully and consciously keep Christ at the center of every aspect of their work.

The human species is terminally narcissistic. Every person is so myopically focused on his own needs and cares that he is unable to see that true happiness and fulfillment is only found in peace with God. Perhaps this is why the Christian's identity in Christ was so central to Paul's theology. The old, self-ruled identity needs to be wrenched away and discarded, and replaced with a new, Christ-ruled identity so the Christian can experience the flood of blessing and goodness that comes from being united to Christ. There is nothing more basic and necessary for the well-being of the believer than keeping his union with Christ at the forefront of his mind. Yet, even Christians still often slip back into their old narcissistic ways, which is why it is so important for pastors to keep reminding them of who they are in Christ and the amazing things Christ has done for them.

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