

United to Christ: The Believer's New Identity

Ryan Kregel

The superstitious Athenians to whom Paul preached wanted to make sure that they didn't miss out on identifying with a god that could possibly be the all-powerful God. They sensed an empty space that they felt compelled to fill with an idol "to the unknown god" (Acts 17:23). To say that the Athenians were missing something is an understatement. They were missing everything. The everything that they were missing was union with Christ.

Union with Christ was something they did not have because they were not given it, in fact, they were hardened (the majority of them were) to Paul's explanation of the resurrection of our bodies, which is made possible only by Christ's resurrection. In the Athenians' quest to identify with a god that would satisfy the emptiness they felt, they ended up identifying with everything that was not God. The legion of shrines and statues that littered the city of Athens clearly attested to that.

The philosophy of the world today does the same. It shouts at you, young person to do whatever you want in order to fill any emptiness you might have in your heart. All of this is done to "help" you figure out who you are. However, the question that you as a Christian young person who is united to Christ need to face is not simply, "Who am I?" Chasing this question will send you down the path to an empty, vain life. Who you are, simply in yourself is nothing. For example, who you are is not related to the things you have or do not have. Maybe you are rich. Maybe you have many friends. Maybe you are very smart. None of these things matter if you are not in Christ. The Christian does not put his trust in his things or his abilities. Rather, the Christian puts all of his confidence in Christ because he *is in Christ*.

Instead of asking yourself, "Who am I?", ask yourself, "Who am I in Christ?" If you make the confession that you are "in Christ," then you must identify yourself with Christ and not the foolishness with which the world invites you to identify.

Our union with Christ can be explained in two parts. We are saved *from* something and we are saved *unto* something. John 15 uses the picture of a vine to describe union with Christ. God, the husbandman of the vine pulled us from the dead stump we were attached to in our fallen father, Adam, and he ingrafted us into his vibrant vine, Jesus Christ. He adopted us as his sons and daughters and gave us salvation, a gift and undeserved. He separated us from our old life so that we no longer live the rest of our lives "in the flesh to the lusts of men, but to the will of God" (1 Pet. 4:2). Our old identity is what he saved us from. But he didn't just save us *from* something; he saved us *unto* something—life in Jesus Christ by our connection to him through faith.

2 Peter 1:1–4 describes that faith we have been given in Jesus Christ. The apostle Peter goes so far as to say that as regenerated children of God, we are made to be "partakers of the divine nature" (v. 4). By implication we are partakers of his righteousness, which was given to us in Jesus Christ. Christ represents us before the judgment seat of God. He made the payment for our sins with his perfect righteousness and then imputed that righteousness to us. It's as if we had never sinned.

This changes everything! As partakers of the righteousness of Christ, we have a new life, a new identity. Colossians 3:1–2 describes what that life should look like: "If ye then be risen with Christ, seek those things which are above, where Christ sitteth on the right hand of God. Set your affection on things above, not on things on the earth." And why do we seek these things? Because we are dead to sin, and our life is "hid with Christ in God" (Col. 3:3).

Maybe you are thinking to yourself that this all sounds great on paper, but in practice you fail time and time again. Maybe this even causes you to doubt your salvation from time to time. Maybe you are beyond doubt, even to the point of despair with the knowledge of your sins and failures. Here is the answer. Are you sorry for your sins? Do your sins bother you? Do you confess your sins to God and ask for his forgiveness? If so, then you *are* seeking those things which are above, and your life is hid with Christ in God. You are his child. Furthermore, Belgic Confession Article 24 states that “it is impossible that this holy faith can be unfruitful in man.” If you are a believer, regardless of your failings, you will produce good fruit, and your true allegiance and union with Christ will be identifiable.

But this brings up an important point. Oftentimes there is a gap between our head and our heart. We hear Christ preached every Sunday, and by Monday afternoon we have already forgotten it, and we are again committing those sins we felt so sorry about on Sunday morning. We claim Christ Jesus as our own, and we identify ourselves with him, but our lives often don’t reflect this. Rankin Wilbourne in his book, *Union with Christ*, calls this “living in the gap.” Living in the gap happens when we are thinking of Christ as a savior outside of us rather than the savior within us. Yes, salvation is something Christ accomplished *for* us, but it becomes more real, more rich, and more beautiful when we realize that Christ has accomplished salvation *in* us.

We know there is a gap between our head and heart and that we often live in that gap. How then do we bridge that gap? As has been alluded to, union with Christ is that bridge. But, union with Christ is not some sort of self-help program. Union with Christ is not some sort of higher spirituality only for those who are at a higher level than everyone else and have by their innate goodness attained unto it. Union with Christ is the Christian life of every ordinary believer. Living a Christian life means we live a disciplined life. We do certain things and avoid doing other things.

The Westminster Shorter Catechism asks the question, “What is the chief end of man?” The answer has much to do with our union with Christ. “Man’s chief end is to glorify God, and to enjoy him forever.” Say it this way to make it more personal: “every ordinary believer’s chief end is to glorify God, and to enjoy him forever.” The joy that we experience is a blessing of salvation, flowing out of our union with Christ. It’s the thrill of knowing that all of our sins have been paid for. How do we glorify God? We glorify God when our thoughts, words, and actions flow from the knowledge and assurance that we are in Christ. What is this but the life of good works to which every child of God is called?

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