
VIDEO LECTURE MODULE: BIBLICAL THEOLOGY

LECTURE 27: UNION

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The John Knox Institute
of Higher Education

Entrusting our Reformed Inheritance to the Church Worldwide

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Module

BIBLICAL THEOLOGY

30 LECTURES

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21 CHAPTERS OLD TESTAMENT · 9 CHAPTERS NEW TESTAMENT

Old Testament Lectures:

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2. Creation
3. Fall
4. Noah
5. Abraham
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Lecture 27

UNION

Lecture Theme:

God magnifies the Savior by revealing that all the benefits of salvation come through the believer's union with Christ.

Text:

“Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who hath blessed us with all spiritual blessings in heavenly places in Christ” (Eph. 1:3).

TRANSCRIPT LECTURE 27

Imagine a poor beggar sitting on the side of the road crying out to a rich man way down the street, pleading for a piece of money. Now imagine a destitute widow buried under a mountain of debt who ends up marrying a wealthy prince. You can feel the stark contrast between those two scenarios, and the difference illustrates an important biblical truth. The true believer is not like the beggar who finds himself separated from Christ and calling out from a distance for some benefit. No, he is like a hopeless widow who has been married to a prince with limitless resources. In being united to Christ, all that belongs to Christ becomes the Christian's. Our debts are canceled, and Christ provides every benefit and blessing we will ever need. The crucial point is union with Christ. We'll consider that theological theme in this lecture.

What is the connection between the accomplishment of redemption in history and the application of redemption to the individual soul? How do we define union with Christ and understand its meaning? How pervasive is this doctrine in the New Testament? What biblical images does God provide for our understanding of it? What are the implications of being united to Christ? Can we separate Christ from His benefits? In this lecture, we will consider this doctrine of union with Christ. You cannot understand the unfolding of God's history of redemption without grasping this significant component in the theology of the New Testament. Union with Christ connects all that we've learned about Christ's work in His incarnate ministry to the benefits received by believers. Comprehending this is necessary for what follows in the next lecture on the application of redemption to the believer.

First of all, we'll consider the importance of union with Christ. Union with Christ lies at the heart of the gospel as something basic and central to all of salvation. It describes how believers become recipients of all that Christ has done and accomplished in redemption. They are made one with Him. Once you come to see the doctrine of union with Christ, you will discover that it is pervasive throughout the whole New Testament, literally

hundreds of references to this doctrine. Everything that Christ accomplished in His life and ministry He did as a representative of His people. The believer enjoys the benefits through union with Him.

The New Testament employs two phrases to describe this union coming from two different directions. First of all, it says that the believer is in Christ. So, the believer is in Christ, and there are many, many, many, many passages of Scripture that make this reference. And secondly, the Bible describes Christ in the believer. Again, there are many references to this as well, and in some places we find both expressions together, as in John 6:56 and John 15:4, or for example, I John 4:13 says, “Hereby know we that we dwell in him, and he in us, because he hath given us of his Spirit.” We see both of them brought together there.

Christ is not only for us, among us, and before us, but He is described as in us, and the Christian is found in Christ. Scripture often uses the propositions *in* and *with* to describe this spiritual reality: union with Christ. Consider Ephesians 1:3–14. Paul begins this breathtaking passage by stating in verse 3, “Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.” Now listen, “who hath blessed us with all spiritual blessings in heavenly places in Christ.” All the benefits are found in Christ. Then, he goes on to expound the implications, noting that everything from the believer’s election to redemption by Christ’s blood to the gift of the Spirit to heavenly inheritance is all found in Christ. Union with Christ extends from eternity past to eternity future. The Bible says that Christ is formed in believers, dwells in our hearts. It describes the fact that believers put on the Lord Jesus Christ, that the church is the body of Christ, that the church is one flesh with Christ, and that believers gain Christ and are so found in him.

John Calvin spoke of union with Christ as having the highest degree of importance. He goes on, “for this is the design of the gospel that Christ may become ours and that we may be engrafted into His body.” He wrote elsewhere, “for we await salvation from Him, not because He appears to us a far off, but because He makes us engrafted into His body, participants not only in all His benefits but also in Himself.”

First of all, we have considered the importance of union with Christ. Now secondly, the meaning of union with Christ. We must understand the nature of this very real union, which is both a representative, or federal union, as well as a personal, or mystical, union. The Bible provides us with a series of pictures to illustrate this truth. First of all, Christ is united to the church as the Head of the body; so believers are members of the body of which Christ is the Head. That’s a picture of our union with Christ.

Secondly, we learn that Christ is married to His people, so in Ephesians 5:30–32, it says in part, “for we are members of his body, of his flesh, and of his bones,” going on to verse 32, “this is a great mystery: but I speak concerning Christ and the church.” And so, we read in the Song of Solomon, “I am my beloved’s and my beloved is mine” (Song of Solomon 6:3). So, the second picture of union with Christ is this: Christ being wed to His bride.

Thirdly, believers are described as living stones and are joined to Christ and built upon Him as the foundation, the church thereby becoming the habitation of God. Peter speaks about this; Paul speaks about this, and so on.

Fourthly, believers are described as branches grafted into Christ as the vine, John 15:4, “Abide in me, and I and you. As the branch cannot bear fruit of itself, except it abide in the vine; no more can ye, except ye abide in me.”

A fifth picture is this: Christ uses the image of food being consumed by the eater. So, by faith we are united to Christ and feed upon Him. In John 6:56 he says, “He that eateth my flesh, and drinketh my blood, dwelleth in me, and I and him.” This is a picture of union with the Lord Jesus Christ. The Bible also describes this union in a variety of other ways. It teaches us that union with Christ is spiritual, not physical. It also teaches us that it is a mysterious and glorious union beyond our full ability to comprehend. You see this in a variety of places. For example, Colossians 1:27 says, “To whom God would make known what is the riches of the glory of this mystery among the Gentiles; which is Christ in you, the hope of glory.” It’s also described as an intimate union: Christ in us, we in him. It’s an indissoluble union. Once a believer is in Christ, the believer is forever joined to Him. So, we’re describing some of the language that the Bible uses to convey this doctrine both in terms of images or illustrations as well as descriptions, but we must connect this to Christ’s ministry.

The Bible teaches that all of Christ’s work was on behalf of the believer. They are united to Him at all points of His activity. Notice how Scripture draws these connections in our union with Christ. In His crucifixion, we are crucified with Him (Galatians 2:20). In His death, we are baptized into His death (Romans 6:3). In His burial, we are buried with Him (Colossians 2:12). In His resurrection, we are resurrected with Christ (Romans 6:5). In His ascension, we have been raised with Him (Colossians 3:1) and following. In His heavenly session, we sit with

Him in heavenly places so that our life is hid with Christ and God (Ephesians 2). In His promised return, what do we read?, when Christ, Who is our life, appears, we also will appear with Him in glory. You see that in a variety of places: in Romans 6, Colossians 2, and so on. Well, this is only a partial list, and we could go on, but you see the importance of this.

All that Christ was accomplishing in His earthly ministry was done as a representative of His people, and we share, in our union with Christ, in the significance of all of His activities. But, the question remains, and perhaps it's in your own mind just now: How are believers united to Christ? what is the bond that brings them together? So, how is it that we're united to Him? Physical union comes through contact, but Christ is in heaven, and we are on earth, so how can this union take place? Well, the answer is twofold. As the Puritan John Flavel said, "The Spirit on Christ's part and faith, His work, on our part are the two ligaments by which we are knit to Christ." And Flavel was right, that's what the Bible teaches. So, the first and primary bond of union with Christ comes through the Holy Spirit. So, on Christ's side, union is brought about through the Holy Spirit. Christ takes the sinner into union with Himself through the agency of the Spirit, whereby He joins Himself to the soul. The same infinite Spirit that dwells with Christ dwells in His people. You can connect all of this to what we learned in our lecture entitled Pentecost.

But secondly, on man's side, we are united to Christ by faith, which is of course a gift of God granted by the Spirit, Ephesians 3:17, "that Christ may dwell in your hearts by faith." So, it is by faith the believer receives Christ. The believer is united to Christ in time through faith. We appropriate and continue to live out of this union through faith in God's Son. So, the believer is united to Christ through the Holy Spirit and through faith in Christ. These are the two sides, if you will, the two parts of the bond that bring about union with Christ.

Thirdly, the implications of union with Christ. In answering the question "How is redemption applied to the sinner?" The first answer must be by uniting the sinner to Christ. We can give many scriptures to demonstrate this. Ephesians 1:7 says, "In whom," in speaking of Christ, in Christ, "we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of sins, according to the riches of his grace." Everything else we will learn in the next lecture flows from this point.

Westminster Larger Catechism question 69 in its answer says, "The communion in grace which the members of the invisible church have with Christ is their partaking of the virtue of His mediation in their justification, adoption, sanctification, and whatever else in this life manifests their union with Him." The believer partakes of Christ's benefits through union with Him. The believer is of course chosen and elected in Christ, Ephesians 1:4, "According as he hath chosen us in him before the foundation of the world." But furthermore, the Bible specifies a connection between union with Christ and the various aspects of the application of redemption; and I'll give you some examples.

We are called in Christ (Ephesians 1:9). We are made alive and regenerated in Christ; we see this in Ephesians 2. In Christ we are justified (Romans 8:1 and about half a dozen other passages). Our adoption comes through union with Christ. We are sanctified in Christ as well. Again, a long list of passages that could be cited here. We are created anew in Christ (II Corinthians 5:17). The believer perseveres in the life of faith in union with Christ. Even at death, the bodies of believers remain in union with Christ. In I Thessalonians 4:14, it speaks about being asleep in Jesus, and of course, we shall be raised with Christ on the last day and shall be eternally glorified with and in the Lord Jesus Christ. If you take any one of these and begin to put together all of the passages that support them, you're going to have a very long list which demonstrates to you how significant and how central this doctrine is. If you merely look for those two words *in Christ* or *in Him*, you'll begin seeing it pop up everywhere throughout the New Testament, and you'll be able to connect the dots with these various aspects of the redemption that Christ provides for His people.

It is important to note that we cannot separate Christ from His benefits. No one can have forgiveness, no one can have heaven, without having the whole Christ. John Calvin speaks of Christ coming to the believer clothed in His benefits. Likewise, we cannot divide Christ, for example, receiving Him as Savior without having Him as Lord. We either have the whole Christ or none of Him, so it's important to see that we can't separate Christ from His benefits. Both justification and sanctification flow as benefits from union with Christ. You can't have one without the other, so the true believer who is justified by faith in Christ will also grow in holiness as a result of God's activity secured in the history of redemption.

In Romans 8:29, we read, “for whom he did foreknow, he also did predestinate to be conformed to the image of his Son, that he might be the firstborn among many brethren.” All who are chosen in Christ, all who are made alive in Christ, all who are justified in the Lord Jesus Christ, will be sanctified in Lord Jesus Christ as well. So, this notion that you will sometimes encounter, where a person will say, “Well, I’m trusting Jesus to save me and deliver me from hell,” but there is no evidence in their life whatsoever of any transformation that has taken place and no fruit of godliness and holiness, should raise a red flag in their mind as well as in the mind of others. You can’t say, “I’m going to have Christ in order that I’ll be clothed in His righteous garments and acceptable before the presence of God” and continue to live as you lived before. One of the benefits include sanctification and all that Christ has secured for making holy people for Himself, a bride that will be presented without spot and blameless. The church is the body and bride of Christ.

Union with Christ provides the basis for communion with Christ or fellowship with Christ. The latter, that is communion, flows from the former, from union with the Lord Jesus. In I John 3:24, it says, “And he that keep his commandments dwelleth in him, and he in him. And hereby we know that he abideth in us, by the Spirit which he hath given us.” And so, the union with Christ results in an ongoing and sustained communion and fellowship between the believer and the Lord Jesus. The two sacraments portray the reality of this blessed union and communion. Notice I Corinthians 12:13, “For by one Spirit are we all baptized into one body, whether we be Jews or Gentiles, whether we be bond or free; and have been all made to drink into one Spirit.” So, union with Christ is being connected to both sacraments there: baptism and the Lord’s Supper.

Baptism signifies union with Christ. Jesus said in Matthew 28:19, “baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost.” Paul develops the connection of baptism in union with Christ in Romans 6 at some length. It represents the believer’s engrafting into Christ, incorporation into the death, burial, and resurrection of the living Christ.

Likewise, the Lord’s Supper signifies the communion between Christ and believers. That derives from the privilege of union with Him. The supper is chiefly about spiritual nourishment, about feeding upon Christ by faith. I Corinthians 10:16 says, “The cup of blessing which we bless, is it not the communion of the blood of Christ? The bread which we break, is it not the communion of the body of Christ?” Christ gives us Himself for sustaining us through this feast. Those in union with Christ continue to receive Christ through His spiritual presence in this ordained means of grace. So even, baptism and the Lord’s Supper are very much connected to union with Christ and the consequent communion that flows from them.

In summary, this doctrine places Christ at the center of history and salvation. Everything imaginable, everything needful is to be found in Him alone. All the benefits and all the blessings of God’s plan of redemption are wrapped up in Christ and received through union with Him. Well, in conclusion, we have seen in this lecture that God magnifies the Savior by revealing that all the benefits of salvation come through the believer’s union with Christ. In the next lecture, we will explore these particular benefits of the application of redemption in greater detail.