

# SYSTEMATIC THEOLOGY

## Video Lecture Series

by Robert D. McCurley, ThM

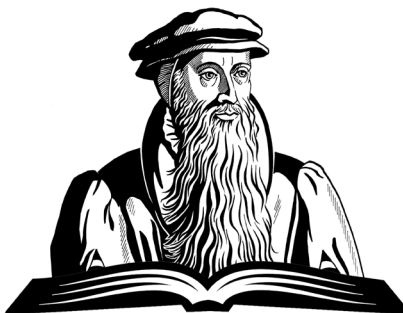
*Module 5:*

**SOTERIOLOGY—**

**THE DOCTRINE OF SALVATION**

*Lecture 2*

**THE DOCTRINE OF UNION WITH CHRIST**



**The John Knox Institute**  
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*Entrusting our Reformed Inheritance to the Church Worldwide*

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### *Module 5 ~ The Doctrine of Salvation*

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## *Module 5 ~ Lecture 2*

# The Doctrine of Union with Christ

Ezekiel 16 provides us with a very graphic picture. It describes God's people as an infant abandoned in an open field, lying in its blood. In this deplorable condition, God came. He rescued, he healed, he raised, and nurtured, and ultimately beautified her. But even more, he, as the King of Glory, married her. So in Ezekiel 16, verse 8, we read, "Behold, thy time was the time of love; and I spread my skirt over thee, and covered thy nakedness: yea, I sware unto thee, and entered into a covenant with thee, saith the Lord GOD, and thou becamest mine." This is a picture of a destitute orphan, who ends up marrying a wealthy prince. The true believer is not like a beggar, who finds himself separated from Christ, and calling out from a distance for some benefit. No, he's like a hopeless person, 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 cancelled, and Christ provides every benefit and blessing that we will ever need. The crucial point is union with Christ. We'll return to Ezekiel 16 at the end of this lecture.

But in this series of lectures in this fifth module, or course, on Systematic Theology, we are devoting ourselves to the study of the doctrine of Salvation. The purpose is to explore what the Bible teaches about how the Spirit applies the redemption of Christ to the individual soul of the believer. In the previous lecture, we considered an introduction to this module. In this lecture, we will consider the doctrine of union with Christ. This doctrine places Christ at the center of salvation. Everything needful is to be found in him alone. All the benefits and blessings of God's plan of redemption are wrapped up in Christ, and received through union with him.

We will begin by considering, first of all, a passage of Scripture to open up our consideration of the doctrine of union with Christ. We read in Ephesians 1, verse 3, "Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who hath blessed us with all spiritual blessings in heavenly places in Christ." Ephesians 1, verse 3 is the beginning of a marvelous passage that extends from verse 3 to verse 14, in which Paul covers the full sweep of the benefits of redemption. Notice in verse 3 that he speaks of "all spiritual blessings" that believers receive and enjoy. He has in mind absolutely everything that pertains to salvation. But secondly, it is especially important to note that he says all the benefits are found "in Christ"—found in Christ. Now Scripture often uses the prepositions "in" and "with" to describe the spiritual reality of union with Christ. The believer partakes of Christ's benefits through being united to him. Paul then goes on to trace the implications, noting that everything from election, to redemption by Christ's blood, to the gift of the Spirit, to heavenly inheritance is found in the Lord Jesus Christ. So the believer's union with Christ extends from eternity past to eternity future. All of this is spelled out in verses 3 to 14.

Furthermore, the rest of the Bible reinforces this connection between union with Christ and the various aspects of the application of redemption. I'll give you some examples. We are called in Christ—1 Corinthians 1:9. We're made alive, or regenerated in Christ—Ephesians 2, verses 4 and 5. In Christ, we're justified—well, this is seen in lots of places: Romans 8:1; 1 Corinthians 1, verse 30; 2 Corinthians 5, verse 21; Philippians 3:8 and 9. We're adopted in Christ—as we see in Galatians 3:26. We're sanctified in Christ—again, I could give you a long string of texts with regards to this: 1 Corinthians 1, verse 2; 1 Corinthians 1, verse 30; John 15, verses 4 and 5; Ephesians 4:6; and so on. We're also created anew in Christ—as we see in 2 Corinthians 5, verse 17. The believer perseveres in the life of faith, in union with Christ—John 10, verses 27 and 28; Romans 8, verses 38 and 39. Even at death, the bodies of believers remain in union with Christ—1 Thessalonians 4, verse 14. We'll be raised with Christ—1 Corinthians 15, verse 22. And we'll be eternally glorified with Christ—1 Thessalonians 4:16 and 17; and many other passages. So what do we see? We see the point made in Ephesians 1, verse 3, that all spiritual blessings are found in Christ, the way in which Paul unpacks that all the way through verse 14, that's reinforced everywhere we turn in the Bible. All of these aspects of salvation—our regeneration, our justification, our sanctification, and so on—all of them are derived from union with Christ.

So in answering the question, “How is redemption applied to the sinner?” The first answer must be, “By uniting the sinner to Christ.” Go back to Ephesians 1, verse 7, which says, “In whom”—“In whom we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of sins, according to the riches of his grace.” Everything else we will learn in this course, on the doctrine of Salvation, flows from this point of union with Christ. *Westminster Larger Catechism*, question #69, 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.”

Well, this introduces to us the doctrine of union with Christ. In the remainder of this lecture, we'll explore what the Scriptures teach us about the role of union with Christ within the doctrines of salvation. And that brings us, secondly, to considering a doctrinal exposition of this introductory material. In *Westminster Shorter Catechism*, question #30, we have the question, “How does the Spirit apply to us the redemption purchased by Christ?” And the answer is this: “The Spirit applieth to us the redemption purchased by Christ, by working faith in us, and thereby uniting us to Christ in our effectual calling.” Well, in the last lecture, we learned about the importance of both redemption accomplished and redemption applied. And the Shorter Catechism explains that the Spirit applies the redemption that's accomplished by Christ, by uniting the believer to Christ. We learned that union with Christ is the fountainhead for everything else that flows in the application of redemption, as we noted earlier, the believer's regeneration, justification, adoption, sanctification, and so on.

Well, how important is this doctrine to understanding salvation? John Calvin spoke of union with Christ as having “the highest degree of importance”—and 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 far off, but because he makes us engrafted into his body, participants not only in all of his benefits, but also in himself.” The Puritan, Thomas Goodwin, expressed a similar conviction, when he said that “Being in Christ and united to him is the fundamental constitution of a Christian.”

Thirdly, union with Christ lies at the heart of the gospel, something basic and central to all of salvation. It describes how believers become recipients of all that Christ has done and accom-



plished in redemption. The believer is made one with him. So, notice, for example, how often Paul uses the word “in” as in, “in Christ.” Once you come to see the doctrine of union with Christ, you’ll discover that it is pervasive throughout the whole New Testament—hundreds of references. 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.

Now, to understand this more fully, the New Testament employs two phrases to describe this union. So the first is, the believer is in Christ. And here you have dozens of examples of passages of Scripture. The second is that Christ is in the believer. And again, you have many passages of Scripture that state this. And in some places, we find both of these expressions together—several places. In 1 John 4, verse 13, for example, it says, “Hereby know we that we dwell in him, and he in us, because he hath given us of his Spirit.” So Christ is not only for us, and among us, and before us, but he’s described as in us, and the Christian is found in Christ. The Bible says that Christ is formed in believers—Galatians 4:19. He dwells in our hearts—Ephesians 3:17. That the believer puts on the Lord Jesus Christ—Romans 13:14. That the church is the body of Christ—1 Corinthians 6, verse 15; chapter 12, verse 27. That the church is one flesh with Christ—Ephesians 5:31 and 32. The believers gain Christ and are found in him—Philippians 3:8 and 9.

Well, fourthly, we must understand the nature of this real union, which is both a representative or federal union, as well as a personal or mystical union. And again, the Bible provides us with a series of pictures to illustrate this truth. First of all, it says that Christ is united to the church, as the head of the body. So that’s a picture of union. Believers are members of the body, joined to the body, of which Christ is the head. Secondly, Christ is married to his people. You see this in Ephesians 5, verses 30 to 32: “For we are members of his body, of his flesh, and of his bones. . . This is a great mystery: but I speak concerning Christ and the church.” We read in the Song of Solomon, “I am my beloved’s, and my beloved is mine.” So the first picture is members joined to the head; the second picture is marriage—a husband joined to a wife. Thirdly, believers are described as living stones that are joined to Christ and built upon him as the foundation, forming a house which becomes the habitation of God. The fourth picture is that believers are branches that are grafted into Christ as the vine—the Gospel of John, chapter 15, verse 4: “Abide in me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit of itself, except it abide in the vine; no more can ye, except ye abide in me.” The fifth picture is that Christ uses the image of food being consumed by the eater. By faith we are united to Christ and feed upon him. John 6, verse 56: “He that eateth my flesh, and drinketh my blood, dwelleth in me, and I in him.” It’s a picture again of union—of oneness. So all of these are pictures that the Bible gives of union with Christ that help us.

But the Bible also describes this union in a variety of ways. What is it? What is it like? What’s its nature? And there are several things here. First of all, it is spiritual—it’s a spiritual union, not a physical union—1 Corinthians 6, verse 17. Secondly, it is a mysterious and glorious union beyond our full ability to comprehend. We see this in Ephesians 5, verse 32. But notice Colossians 1, verse 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.” So it’s a mysterious and glorious union. Thirdly, it’s an intimate union. Christ is in the believer, and the believer in him. And then fourthly, it is an indissoluble union. Once the believer is in Christ, the believer is forever joined to him; can never be disconnected, severed, or taken out of union with him.

Furthermore, we need to go on and connect this doctrine of union with Christ to Christ’s ministry. Because the Bible teaches that all of Christ’s work, you know, what he’s accomplished, was on behalf of the believer. So they are united to him at all points of his activity. Notice how Scripture

draws these connections in our union with Christ. In Christ's crucifixion, the believer is crucified with him—Galatians 2:20. In his death, we are baptized into his death—Romans 6, verse 6. In his burial, we're buried with him—Colossians 2, verse 12. In his resurrection, we are resurrected with Christ—Romans 6, verse 5. In his ascension, we have been raised with him—Colossians 3, verse 1 and following. And in his heavenly session, we sit with him in heavenly places, so that our life is hid with Christ in God—Ephesians 2, verse 6. Even in his promised return, when Christ, who is our life, appears, we also will appear with him in glory—you see this in Romans 6, in Colossians 2, and Colossians 3. Well, this is only a partial list. We could go on. But you see the importance. All that Christ is accomplishing in his work, the believer is united with him in that activity.

Yet the question still remains: How? How are believers united to Christ? In other words, what is the bond that brings them together? So if you think, you know, physical union comes through contact—a physical branch being grafted into a stock of a tree; or a man and woman coming together in marriage. In a lot of those pictures, physical union comes through contact. But you say to yourself, “Yes, but Christ is in heaven, and we are on earth, so how can this union take place?” Well, the answer is twofold. As the English 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 so, first of all, the first and primary bond of union, from Christ's side, is through the Holy Spirit. Christ takes the sinner into union with himself through the agency of the Holy Spirit, whereby he joins himself to the believing soul. The Spirit indwells the believer. The same infinite Spirit that dwells with Christ dwells in his people. So that Christ dwells in us by his Spirit. First John 4, verse 13, says, “Hereby know we that we dwell in him, and he in us, because he hath given us of his Spirit.” So that's the first half. Secondly, on man's side, we are united to Christ by faith, which is a gift of God granted by the Spirit. So Ephesians 3, verse 17, says, “That Christ may dwell in your hearts by faith.” It is by faith that the believer receives Christ. So the believer is united to Christ in time, by faith. We appropriate and continue to live out of this union through faith—Galatians 2, verse 20; Ephesians 3, verses 16 and 17. So the believer is united to Christ by the Holy Spirit, through faith in Christ. That's how the union comes about. Well, that's a doctrinal exposition.

Thirdly, we need to go on to explore this doctrine polemically, and just a couple of brief things here. First of all, overlooking or neglecting the doctrine of union with Christ would destroy the link between the redemption Christ accomplished, and the application of that salvation to the believing soul. So, it's important to recognize we're covering this doctrine of union with Christ at the beginning of this series of lectures on the doctrine of Salvation. We're going to go on to look at all the various components of what that entails. But we're starting with the union—union with Christ. If we neglect this, you wouldn't be able to understand how all that Christ has done ends up becoming appropriated by the individual soul. It would also remove Christ from the center of salvation. He has the preeminence. Everything must be found in him, and everything must flow from him. So beware of neglecting it, or overlooking union with Christ.

Secondly, it's important to note that we cannot separate Christ from his benefits, or from the benefits that flow from him to the soul. No one can have forgiveness and heaven without having the whole Christ. Calvin speaks of Christ coming to the believer clothed in his benefits, so that in receiving Christ, we receive the benefits with him. So we can't divide Christ. There are those who have this idea that you can have Jesus as your Savior without having him as Lord. That would be to rip Christ in two, and take only one part. So we either have the whole Christ, or none of him. He has to be Savior and Lord. And when it comes to the doctrine of Salvation, you'll see how this is connected in our future lectures, because both justification and sanctification, both of them flow as

benefits from union with Christ. You can't have one without the other. You can't have justification and not have sanctification. The true believer will grow in holiness, as a result of God's activity secured in the history of redemption. Romans 8, verse 29: "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." So let us beware of the error of disconnecting Christ from his benefits.

Fourthly, we can now draw some practical application for ourselves. First of all, the church is the body and bride of Christ. So union with Christ provides the basis for unity, or union, within the church. Each individual believer is a member joined to the head, which is Christ, but thereby joined to one another, so that we're brought together. We're united to fellow believers, as a result of being united to Christ. You'll notice the importance of the connections that believers have to each other in places like Romans chapter 12, and, 1 Corinthians chapter 12, and Ephesians 4, and all of those passages throughout the New Testament that speak about the people of God, in terms of being together, of one another, of being mindful of one another, and relating to one another. We need other Christians. It's impossible to go solo to heaven. We have to depend upon other believers that we are united to. Ephesians 4:16 says, "From whom"—that is, Christ—"the whole body fitly joined together and compacted by that which every joint supplieth, according to the effectual working in the measure of every part, maketh increase of the body unto the edifying of itself in love." And so, believers can only grow in grace by growing together. So that's one application, that our union with Christ results in practical implications in terms of our union with fellow believers.

Secondly, union with Christ provides the basis for communion with Christ, or union provides the basis for fellowship with Christ. That communion or fellowship with Christ flows from union. First John 3, verse 24, it says, "And he that keepeth 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." So communion with God is part of the core of the Christian life. Communion or fellowship means giving and receiving, and so we are receiving things from Christ—his grace, his blessings, his benefits—and we are giving things, in terms of the exercise of faith, and worship, and in praise, and in service, in obedience, and love to him. And there's this giving and taking, so that the believer has communion with Christ in prayer, has communion with Christ in the ministry of the word, has communion with Christ in the sacrament of the Lord's Supper, and so on. Their whole life is taken up in walking with Christ, and holding fellowship with him throughout the day and week, and so on. Well, all of that, which is so important, and the core, as I say, that communion flows from union with him. You can't have the one without the other.

Thirdly, to apply this more specifically, the two sacraments of Baptism and the Lord's Supper portray the reality of this blessed union and communion. First Corinthians 12, verse 13 says, "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, you think of Baptism. Baptism signifies union with Christ. Jesus said, in Matthew 28, verse 19, "Baptizing them into the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost." Baptized into the name—it's a picture of union. Paul develops this, the connection of Baptism and union with Christ in Romans 6. It represents the believer's being grafted into Christ, incorporation into the death, burial, and resurrection of the living Christ.

Well then, secondly under this point, the Lord's Supper signifies the communion between Christ and believers that derives from the privileges of union with him. The Supper is chiefly about spiritual nourishment, about feeding upon Christ by faith. First Corinthians 10, verse 16: "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 himself to the believer for sustaining the believer, through this feast. Those in union with Christ continue to receive Christ through his spiritual presence in this ordained means of grace, the ordinance of the Lord’s Supper.

Fourthly, in terms of considering this practically, I want us to turn to that passage I opened with at the beginning of this lecture, in Ezekiel 16. We noted, you’ll remember, the infant that was found in an open field, destitute, covered in its own blood, how God took them and cleansed them, and raised them, and fed them, and nurtured them, and then ultimately, married them. Well, the main point of that passage is something further, because the Lord is saying, “After all of this bounty, after all this blessing, after all these things that I’ve done to you, in taking you, who were undeserving, into union with myself, and marrying you to myself,” he goes on to warn them and even rebuke them about the danger of spiritual harlotry. So this is an important point, in terms of application of union with Christ. Paul brings this out in places like 1 Corinthians 6 as well. He says, “Don’t you know that those who are joined to a harlot become one with her?” And he’s speaking about how incompatible it is for the Christian to go after sin and the things of sin when they’re wed to Christ. And so there’s this graphic imagery of the threat, when the believer allows other things in their life to replace Christ—idols, things that they love, things that they pursue, the world, and various sins, and so on. They’re engaging in whoredom, in spiritual harlotry. They’re forsaking their first love and turning after other lovers. And this is absolutely incompatible with union with Christ. When the believer comes to understand the doctrine of union with Christ and being married to him, there’s a pledge, there’s a covenant, there’s a loyalty, there’s a devotion. There’s an obligation to the Lord Jesus Christ. And when we drift away from him, and begin to pursue other loves, the things of this world, more than him, we’re engaging in harlotry. And seeing that should horrify us. Seeing that should reinforce our sense of attachment to him, and our sense of staying close to him, and walking in holiness and in devotion to him.

Well, in conclusion, in this lecture, we’ve learned from the Scriptures the important place of union with Christ within the doctrines of Salvation. Everything else that we’ll consider in this fifth module about the application of redemption flows from union with Christ. In the next lecture, we’ll consider the doctrines of Effectual Calling and Regeneration, which form the beginning of the application of redemption to the believing soul.