

## The Crucial Role of Union with Christ in Understanding the Gospel

David Snoke, University of Pittsburgh, 2010

Several years ago, I was part of a Muslim-Christian dialogue group at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. I remember vividly an argument one Muslim friend made at the time. He said, “Imagine that you are in a law court, and the judge says you are guilty, but he is going to give your punishment to another man. How could that possibly be just?”

This problem lies at the root of many of the debates about the Gospel over the years, from the Reformation to the present-day debates with N.T. Wright.<sup>1</sup> Wright accepts that our sins can be imputed to Christ, but he rejects the idea that Christ’s righteousness can be imputed to us, for much the same reason as my Muslim friend: Wright says righteousness “is not a gas that can be passed across the courtroom.”<sup>2</sup> I heard the same argument in another form several years ago in the tracts of Charles Finney, reprinted by the radical Christian musician Keith Green. In one tract, he had a picture of a Christian, smirking and wallowing in sin, hiding behind a cardboard cutout of Jesus. The caption read, “God doesn’t see my sin, he just sees Jesus!” The implication was clear: imputing Christ’s righteousness to me is a falsehood, an injustice.

How can we see God as just in imputing our sin to Christ, and Christ’s righteousness to us? Is it a miscarriage of justice? This is indeed the central dilemma of the Gospel. How can God be just, and truthful, in declaring us to be good (righteous) and declaring that we have atoned for our sins? God cannot be a liar. Any formulation of the Gospel which has God saying something

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<sup>1</sup> N.T. Wright, *Justification: God's Plan and Paul's Vision*, (IVP Academic, 2009).

<sup>2</sup> N.T. Wright, *What Saint Paul Really Said*, (Eerdmans, 1998), p. 98.

that is not true impugns the justice and truthfulness of God. How can God truthfully declare us righteous? Yet the Bible clearly says that he does: “God justifies the ungodly” (Romans 4:4).

I do not want to enter here into the debate about the meaning of the word “justify” which is going on these days.<sup>3,4</sup> I will mention two passages that are important to me. The first is Luke 7:29, which says that the people “justified” (ἐδικαίωσαν) God. This makes sense only if “justified” means “declared to be good.” It cannot refer to God’s being part of a community. Second, Luke 18:14 says that the publican was “justified” (δεδικαιωμένος) after his prayer of repentance and faith, and not the Pharisee. Yet to any outside observer, the Pharisee was a member in good standing in the people of God of his day, and the publican was not. Thus being justified does not primarily have to do with outward belonging to a community. It primarily means that God declares us as good, as acceptable in his sight.

### **How can it be just?**

The fundamental question before us is then how it can be just, that is, correctly judged, to impute Christ’s righteousness to us and to impute our sin to Christ. This leads to the question: is there ever any situation in which it is just to impute one person’s debt or credit to another? The answer is yes. Consider the following situations. In each case, notice the crucial role of the union of the people involved.

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<sup>3</sup> John Piper, *The Future of Justification: A Response to N. T. Wright* (Crossway Books, 2007).

<sup>4</sup> R.C. Sproul, *Faith Alone: The Evangelical Doctrine of Justification* (Baker Books, 1999).

Case 1: If my wife runs up the credit cards which are jointly held in both our names, all of society agrees that I am liable for the debt. Why? Because we are united together, so that her debt is my debt. In the same vein, imagine a man getting an award for a great scientific accomplishment. He honors his wife during his acceptance speech, saying that she deserves credit too. Does anyone in the audience say “What a joke! She did not do any of the science. She deserves no credit!” Of course not! We feel the *justice* of his sharing the credit with her. In the same way, we congratulate the parents when their child graduates or receives some other honor, even though the child did the work. Why? Because they are united together.

Case 2: Some might say that in the above cases, the shared credit is not the same as the imputed righteousness of Christ, because Christ’s righteousness is wholly from outside us, while in the case of a husband and wife, or parent and child, their credit comes because they actually did share in the work, even if it was not the same type of work. The parent may have helped drive the child to practices; the wife may have been very helpful to her scientist husband. I don’t think this is what is on our minds when we give shared credit, however. Consider another example: a sports team. If the team wins, everyone on the team shares the credit, even members who did not play, but sat on the bench. Imagine how we would feel if at the victory party, the team captain said “Of course I and the other starters deserve most of the credit—those guys who were third string did nothing!” We would condemn that as an injustice. Why? Because in accepting the union of the team, all the players agree that all will be imputed with the credit of the victories, and with a share in the shame of any failures.

In the case of the bench warmer on the team who did not play, we might say that this still does not exactly match our relationship to Christ, because the bench warmer presumably was

good enough to play, and could have played, and so deserves some credit, while we could not take Christ's place. But this is not the essence of the shared credit of teams. Our role in relation to Christ is perhaps better represented by the common practice in the U.S. of having mentally handicapped members on youth sports teams. It is well understood that these members do not contribute to the actual winning of games, and cannot. But would we say that they should not rejoice when the team wins, that they should not be allowed to claim to share the credit? Most of us, I think, would be aghast at the idea of refusing to allow a handicapped member to attend the team banquet and share in the credit of a good season. We recognize that by making them members of the team, that is, by being united to them, they have all the rights of ownership of the victories of the team.

One could go, perhaps, even further to argue that fans of a sports team feel the right to celebrate the victories of the team, and to mourn its losses, even though they did not even enter the playing field. By virtue of feeling attached to the team (e.g. "Steelers nation") the whole community feels a right of ownership of both the good and the bad. Fans often talk of "our" losses and victories, even though they did not play the game.

Case 3: A Chinese law student pointed out to me that the above cases both refer to what we would call "civil" debt or credit, not "moral" or "criminal" debt or credit. Can moral debt also be shared? Consider the case of the sports team again, but in a different situation: suppose that the players on a team act badly, perhaps breaking the law or by acting immaturely. We respect a team captain, or a coach, who says "The blame is on me." Why? Because the captain or coach really did the evil? Or because we know without doubt that the coach or captain could have

prevented it? No. Fundamentally, what we respect is the willingness to keep the bond of unity even at cost of owning another's failure. In the same way, we respect the business or government leader who says "the buck stops here." A coach, or a business or government team leader, who denies the imputation of guilt accredited by other team members is said to "throw them under the bus," a description which implies moral failure on the part of the one refusing to share, or even totally own, the blame of the others.

Case 4: It is surprising to me that my Muslim friend, and many other Muslims, insist on completely disconnected individual credit and debt for sins, when in the Muslim world, the idea of "honor killings" and shared shame and credit for the acts of family members is deeply embedded in the culture. If a girl in a family falls into sexual sin, or if a son becomes a Christian, the entire family is understood to be imputed the guilt and shame, by virtue of their union in the family. In the same way it is quite typical for a family member who comes into a financial windfall to feel that other family members have a partial right of ownership of it. It might in fact be a very fruitful avenue of interfaith dialogue to discuss with Muslims the sense of imputation which exists in their own culture. Does that sense come from Islamic teachings, or from far earlier Middle Eastern cultural understanding?

In the West, of course, "honor killings" are rejected, but the reason it is not an issue is not because of our strong sense of rejecting revenge, but because we have no strong sense of connection to our families. If a brother or sister sins, we simply avoid that person. If they become poor we feel it is their problem, not ours. Families with a strong sense of bonding to each other

do feel a sense of shared shame in the misdeeds of others, and a sense of shared ownership of blessings and needs of others.

In all of these cases, the common element is that we feel that it is just to impute the debts and credits of one person to another if they are united together in a real union. They have become legally, or spiritually, one. In that case, justice actually demands imputation of the debt and credit of one member of the union to another. *To the degree that I recognize the reality of the union, to that degree I accept the imputation as legitimate.*

Our union with Christ is exactly of this nature. Christ's death is *our* death if we are united to him, and his righteousness is *our* righteousness if we are united to him. In other words, the actual, real union with Christ is crucial for the imputation in the Gospel to be just. If we are not really united to Christ, then his death is nothing to us, and his life of no value to us.

The concept of our union with Christ has long been taught in Christian circles, especially in Reformed Protestantism, but it often has been taught with the feel of being a reward, or benefit, following from our justification in Christ, rather than a prerequisite for it. Yet the above considerations imply that the union is what makes the justification of sinners possible. This implies that the order is 1) real union with Christ comes about through the Holy Spirit, by the instrument of faith, 2) consequently we are justified by the deeds of Christ being imputed to us, and our sinful deeds being imputed to him. Reformed theologians would then add that we remain united to Christ, in a bond that can never be broken, and this union brings about gradual increase

in outward goodness through the process of “sanctification.” As Calvin said,<sup>5</sup> we cannot grab hold of the Second Person of the Trinity, that is, Christ and his redeeming work, without grabbing hold of the Third, namely, the Holy Spirit and his sanctifying work.

### **New Testament evidence of union with Christ**

The above argument fits with our sense of justice, but is it the teaching of the Bible? I believe that it is, and in fact, the Middle Eastern culture of the Bible would have made it much more understandable, even so obvious as to not need to be stated, in the days when the Bible was written.

The concept of union with Christ is clearly taught in Scripture, and has been affirmed by all orthodox Reformed traditions. The Bible has many different ways of presenting this picture. Jesus talks in John 15 of us being united to him like a branch on a vine:

Abide in me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit by itself, unless it abides in the vine, neither can you, unless you abide in me. I am the vine; you are the branches.

Whoever abides in me and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit, for apart from me you can do nothing. (John 15:4-5)<sup>6</sup>

This image of being “in” Christ, and simultaneously having him “in” us, is throughout the New Testament. Christ talks of him being a fountain of water “in” us (John 4:14); this is also the

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<sup>5</sup> J. Calvin and J. Sadoletto, *A Reformation Debate*, J.C. Olin, ed. (Baker, 2000).

<sup>6</sup> All Bible quotations are from the English Standard Version.

image presented by Christ in John 6 when he talks of us eating and drinking the Son— taking Christ into us. As with the vine image, he says in no uncertain terms that we cannot be saved at all if we do not take him in this way (John 6:53). Paul talks of Christ “dwelling in our hearts through faith” (Ephesians 3:17). Also, as many commentators have noted, the phrase translated “believed in him” used throughout the New Testament can be translated “believed into (εἰς) him” (e.g. John 2:11, Galatians 2:16), implying a deep connection created by faith. The same notion is conveyed by the description of people “receiving” Jesus (John 1:11-12).

This union with Christ “in us” is closely associated with the idea of the indwelling of the Holy Spirit. The Spirit is the agent of our union with Christ, that is, of Christ being “in” us:

And by this we know that he abides in us, by the Spirit whom he has given us. (1 John 3:24)

By this we know that we abide in him and he in us, because he has given us of his Spirit. (1 John 4:13)

You, however, are not in the flesh but in the Spirit, if in fact the Spirit of God dwells in you. Anyone who does not have the Spirit of Christ does not belong to him. (Romans 8:9)

Peter uses the image of being “partakers of the divine nature” (2 Peter 1:4); John talks of “God’s seed abiding in us” (1 John 3:9); Paul talks of the Spirit living in us (e.g. Romans 8:9-11, 1 Corinthians 3:16). Christ says



And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Helper, to be with you forever, even the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it neither sees him nor knows him. You know him, for he dwells with you and will be in you. (John 14:16-17)

All of these passages give a picture of an intimate relationship in which Christ is “in” us and we are “in” Christ. Another image of this union is that of God making a home with us (John 14:23), which brings to mind the homemaking of a married couple. Christ explicitly invokes the picture of our union with him as that of husband and wife (John 3:29) and John echoes this in Revelation 19:7 21:2, and 21:9. Paul also takes up this image in Ephesians 5:31-32; this passage can even be taken to mean that the relationship of man and wife was specifically created by God to model the union he has with his people.

In the synoptic Gospels, we are also given the images of being “yoked” to Christ (Matthew 11:29) and being a “follower” of Christ. Yoking together of oxen brings to mind immediately the concept of union, while the image of being a follower of Christ implies union in a way much more understandable in the first century than now. A follower was united to his teacher, and went with him everywhere. Thus, when Christ talks of us “following” him, he is using yet another image for being united to him. This is a deep relationship, which involves leaving behind everything (e.g. Matthew 8:22) and taking up our cross daily (Matthew 10:38, Mark 8:34, Luke 9:23), not just casually following for a while. In many ways, the message of the synoptic Gospels is a simple message of relationship with Christ: follow him, join yourself to him, and he will make all things well. Those who do not follow him are lost. The picture of faith

is thus not of merely assenting to a propositional statement, but of attaching yourself to a person whom you trust. Perhaps the most apt modern image of this relationship is that of a coach of a sports team. The team is not free to follow or not follow the coach as they choose from day to day; they are signed on to do whatever he says, and many coaches extend their leading into all areas of the athletes' lives.

Yet another image is that of being “born of God”—becoming children of God, united to him, as it were, by the bond of a parent and child:

Everyone who believes that Jesus is the Christ has been born of God. (1 John 5:1)

Jesus answered, “Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God. (John 3:5)

Those who become children of God become family members of Christ, who is the firstborn son (Matthew 5:9, 12:49, Hebrews 2:11) and have the right to call God “father” and to be called sons and daughters (Romans 8:14-16, 2 Corinthians 6:18, Galatians 3:26, 4:6).

Sometimes the image is used of being adopted children of God, rather than born children (e.g. Romans 8:15, Ephesians 1:5). This is similar to the idea of branches being “grafted” onto the vine of Christ (Romans 11:17-23), but in each case, the image is still one of real union. The grafting of a vine onto the branch of Christ requires a special act of God, similar to the act of

God in making us “born” a second time, to become adopted not just as a legal act, but as a sort of redoing of the physical act.<sup>7</sup>

All of these word pictures teach us of real union with Christ, and present the view that this union is not optional, but crucial for the Christian. The concept of union with Christ is therefore ensconced in the Reformed creeds, e.g. the Westminster Larger Catechism:

65. What special benefits do the members of the invisible church enjoy by Christ?

A. The members of the invisible church by Christ enjoy union and communion with him in grace and glory.

Q. 66. What is that union which the elect have with Christ?

A. The union which the elect have with Christ is the work of God’s grace, whereby they are spiritually and mystically, yet really and inseparably, joined to Christ as their head and husband; which is done in their effectual calling.

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<sup>7</sup> Some may object that in Romans 11:17-23, the image of ingrafting refers to Gentiles being grafted into the visible people of God. The way in which Gentiles are added, however, is not by a fiat legal act pronounced about their community, but by the work of the Spirit to unite them individually to Christ through faith (Acts 11:18, 15:17, 28:28, Galatians 3:8, Ephesians 3:6). The hallmark of the new community is the evidence of heart change, not birth into a physical community, whether Jew or Gentile (Matthew 7:16-23).

## **Evidence of union as a legal grounds for imputation**

This doctrine of union with Christ is not controversial. What is not often brought out in Reformed teaching, to my knowledge, is the concept that our union with Christ is essential in our justification, that is, that imputation rests legally on union.

One of the most clear passages in the New Testament on this is Romans 8:1-17. Here Paul is summarizing his teaching of the Gospel in the first seven chapters. He boldly states “There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Jesus Christ” (8:1). Notice that the message of no condemnation is given to those who are “in” Christ—united to him. Continuing, he explains how this has happened: God “condemned sin in the flesh, in order that the righteous requirement of the Law might be *fulfilled in us*” (8:3-4, my emphasis). In other words, Paul is concerned that the legal declaration of God that we are righteous be fulfilled *in us*, so that it may be true, and not a lie, that we are righteous. As my Muslim friend pointed out, it cannot be otherwise if God is not a liar. Yet how is it that the law is fulfilled in us? By our own deeds? No, by Christ being *in us*. In Romans 8, Paul makes clear who has this salvation: those who are “not in the flesh but in the Spirit.” He states clearly: “Anyone who does not have the Spirit of Christ does not belong to him. But *if Christ is in you*, although the body is dead because of sin, the Spirit is life because of righteousness. 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*” (8:9-11). Paul clearly gives an if-then relationship: if you have the Spirit of Christ in you, you will live, and if you do not have the Spirit of Christ in you, you will die. What is the work of the Spirit to save us? It is to give us “life because of righteousness” (διὰ δικαιοσύνην). This is a difficult phrase to interpret. Does it mean that

because of God's goodness and mercy, he gives us life? I argue that the "righteousness" in view here is not referring to God's mercy, but rather to his justice. Paul is saying that the Spirit gives us life on the basis of justice, because God's life is in us, and therefore the righteous requirement of the Law is fulfilled "in us." The "life" which Paul has in view is not the physical life we will receive at the final resurrection, but the spiritual life of Christ in us immediately, by virtue of union with him.

The overarching question here is whether Paul is arguing that we have the Spirit as a *consequence* of not being condemned, or whether he is arguing that not being condemned is a consequence of being united to Christ through the Spirit. It seems clear to me that Paul is not arguing from justification to the indwelling of the Spirit; rather, he is arguing from the indwelling of the Spirit to life and justification, i.e., not being condemned. We are saved "if" we have the Spirit of Christ in us. The Spirit is essential to our lack of condemnation, not just because his presence is an evidence or a consequence of salvation, but because the Spirit of Christ in us *gives life*. The same message is given in John 6:35-63, especially 6:53-54 and 6:63—Jesus says that we must be united to him by the Spirit because this union *gives us life*. The logic of Jesus's speech in John 6 is not that we first are saved, and then receive life as a separate blessing, but that our union with Christ through the Spirit is the *means* of salvation, not merely as a vehicle to give us faith, but a union which makes us really own the virtues of Christ. This picture of life in us because of Christ being in us, and Christ has life, is the paradigm of legitimate imputation.

The same point is made in the first letter of John. As discussed above, the Gospel of John contains numerous references to Christ being in us, or abiding in us, and this same language is continued in the 1 John. Throughout the letter, John interweaves several concepts: those who are in Christ turn away from sin, because Christ lives in them; the presence of Christ living in our through his Spirit should set our hearts at ease; the Spirit in us leads to blessing, protecting us from evil spirits, keeping us from denying Christ, and granting favor to our prayers. Clearly, one of John's teachings is what in Reformed theology would be called ongoing sanctification: the Spirit lives in us, and because he is in us, he inevitably will produce real change in us of greater righteousness in our practice. But John's main point is that our sense of assurance should ultimately come from our knowledge that the Spirit of Christ is in us (which is evidenced by love and good works). He says "we may have confidence for the day of judgment, because *as he is so also are we* in this world," (1 John 4:17) and "And this is the testimony, that God gave us eternal life, and *this life is in his Son*. Whoever has the Son has life; whoever does not have the Son of God does not have life" (1 John 5:11-12). In other words, what belongs to the Son belongs to us, because he is in us. Because he has life in himself, so we also have that life. This life is not a *reward* for our righteousness imputed to us, but the source of it. Wright may say that righteousness is not a "gas which can be passed across the courtroom," but then neither is life, normally. Wright is wrong because he assumes that the advocate and the defendant are unconnected, as we typically assume in our society. But we are united to our advocate, as one organic living being. We share the righteousness of the Son because we share the life of the Son. Our life is not a something distinct from the life of the Son, which is copied; it is his life actually being lived in us.

Returning to Paul's letter to the Romans, in chapter 6 we have the famous passage in which Paul argues that the free grace of the Gospel does not lead us into wanton sin:

What shall we say then? Are we to continue in sin that grace may abound? By no means! How can we who died to sin still live in it? Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? We were buried therefore with him by baptism into death, in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life. For if we have been united with him in a death like his, we shall certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his. We know that our old self was crucified with him in order that the body of sin might be brought to nothing, so that we would no longer be enslaved to sin. For one who has died has been set free from sin. Now if we have died with Christ, we believe that we will also live with him. We know that Christ being raised from the dead will never die again; death no longer has dominion over him. For the death he died he died to sin, once for all, but the life he lives he lives to God. So you also must consider yourselves dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus. (Romans 6:1-11)

Many have taken this passage roughly as follows: because Christ has died for us, we *ought to* respond by being obedient. This is somewhat supported by Paul's command, "Consider yourselves" to be dead to sin, and later verses with an emphasis on what we should do. But what Paul is primarily arguing here is that it is *impossible* for those in Christ to be slaves to sin. He argues this by virtue of our union with Christ: we have died with Christ, being buried with him (6:4) and being "united with him in a death like his" (6:5). This last phrase can be translated as

“sympathetically generated,” or “co-planted,” in the likeness of his death. In other words, we have begun our life through union with him in an image-death.<sup>8</sup>

Paul argues in the past tense, on what has already been accomplished: we are dead to sin, because we died with Christ; in yet another image of union, of slave and master, Paul says we are slaves of Christ, not slaves of sin (6:17, 22), and our heart has been changed so that we are obedient “from the heart” (6:17).

The “death” of Romans 6:4-5 is often taken as the act of baptism which is symbolic of Christ’s death and symbolic of our submission to him, even to the point of death. But Paul is not arguing that our baptism is the act which changes everything. He is arguing that our union with Christ changes everything. In 6:8 he says “we have died with Christ” and therefore we have life in us. Is our sacramental baptism that death? That, of course, would make our baptism into a type of works-salvation, which might not bother some Christian groups. But Paul’s argument makes no sense if baptism is all that is in view. In 6:6 he says, “Our old self was crucified with him”—clearly a reference to a spiritual event, not a physical one. Similarly, in Galatians 2:20, Paul says “I have been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me,” in a passage very parallel to the passage in Romans 6, starting with the question, “If, in our endeavor to be justified in Christ, we too were found to be sinners, is Christ then a servant of sin?” (2:17) and with the same firm answer: “Certainly not!” Yet in the Galatians passage, the

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<sup>8</sup> Paul appears to coin new terms here to describe our union with Christ, which are hard to translate into English, but have the roughly literal meanings of “co-deeply generated” (σύμφυτοι γεγόναμεν) and “co-crucified” (συνεσταυρώθη); he also does this in Ephesians 2:5-6, where he coins new words when he says we were “co-generated” (συνεζωποίησεν) with Christ and “co-resurrected” (συνήγειρεν) with Christ.



sacrament of baptism is nowhere in view or even mentioned. Rather, Paul argues again on the basis of our union with Christ.

The “baptism” in Romans 6:3-4 can be taken in one of two ways. Either Paul is saying that those who were baptized physically were also baptized spiritually, or he is using the word “baptism” in the general sense of “immersed,” without reference to the sacrament at all—we have been immersed into Christ, and immersed into his death. The latter interpretation is supported by uses of the word “baptism” in other places to refer to Christ’s death, e.g. Mark 10:38-39 and Luke 12:50, and by Jesus’s reference to baptism by the Holy Spirit (Acts 1:5).<sup>9</sup>

Going further backwards in Romans, Paul has a lengthy discussion of imputation in Romans 5:

Therefore, just as sin came into the world through one man, and death through sin, and so death spread to all men because all sinned...But the free gift is not like the trespass. For if many died through one man’s trespass, much more have the grace of God and the free gift by the grace of that one man Jesus Christ abounded for many. And the free gift is not like the result of that one man’s sin. For the judgment following one trespass brought

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<sup>9</sup> Luke 11:38 indicates that the physical “immersion” need not be completely under water, unless one would argue that Jesus was expected to go fully under water in preparation for a meal at someone else’s home. Here the host expects Jesus to “baptize” himself before dinner. Nevertheless, the word “baptism” does carry the connotation of “plunging into,” which can also be applied to plunging hands under water during washing. This, of course, is a subject of debate in regard to infant baptism.

condemnation, but the free gift following many trespasses brought justification. If, because of one man's trespass, death reigned through that one man, much more will those who receive the abundance of grace and the free gift of righteousness reign in life through the one man Jesus Christ. Therefore, as one trespass led to condemnation for all men, so one act of righteousness leads to justification and life for all men. For as by the one man's disobedience the many were made sinners, so by the one man's obedience the many will be made righteous. (Romans 5:12-19)

Paul says that the act of Adam led to "condemnation for all" (5:16). This is the doctrine of original sin, which bothers many people. If each man's sin is his own, then imputing Adam's sin to us is an injustice. But if we are really united to Adam, then his sin can be imputed to us justly. This is a principle throughout Scripture, though it does bother people: God "visits the iniquity" of the fathers on their children (e.g. Exodus 20:5). The famous passage in Ezekiel 18, in which God says that the sins of the fathers will not be visited on the children, is presented as a new thing, a new grace (18:3), in contrast to the normal expectation that "the fathers have eaten sour grapes, and the children's teeth are set on edge" (18:2). Ezekiel 18:25 seems to anticipate that *not* accounting the fathers' sins to the children will lead to an accusation of injustice: "Yet you say, 'The way of the Lord is not just.'" God's response is to say that this new state of affairs is accomplished justly by means of a "new heart and new spirit" (18:31). This parallels the new covenant discussed in Jeremiah 31:31-34, which is defined by God writing on the hearts of the people.

Imputing the sin of Adam (and our other physical parents) to us makes no sense to us if we have a low view of our union with our parents. In cultures where families are strongly bonded, however, it makes perfect sense. In the same way, the imputation of our sin to Christ and his righteousness to us makes sense if we believe he is truly united to us, and no sense if we think he is a stranger to us. Imputation of Christ's deeds makes sense in the same way that imputation of Adam's sin, and the sin of our parents, makes sense. Fundamentally, we are united to one family or the other, the family of Adam or the family of Christ. By virtue of our transfer out of the vine of Adam and into the vine of Christ, we have new life from the new root.<sup>10</sup>

### **Old Testament evidence**

Perhaps the most important evidence for the importance of union with Christ in the New Testament is the constant reference to Christ's death as a sacrifice of the type described in the Old Testament. Paul, in Romans 3:25, starts out his presentation of the Gospel, which we have been tracing backward, by referring to Christ's death as a "propitiation" (ἱλαστήριον), a direct reference to the temple sacrifice (cf. Hebrews 9:5, where this word is also used).

The sacrifices of the Old Testament are full of the imagery of union. In every case, the mode of offering is for the priest to lay his hand on the head of the animal to be sacrificed (Leviticus 1:4, 3:2, 3:8, 3:13, 4:4, 4:24, 4:29, 4:33) including the laying of both hands on the scapegoat (Leviticus 16:21). The essential symbolism of this laying on of hands is that of union. When the hand is laid on the animal, the two are united, and sin flows from the man to the

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<sup>10</sup> In addition to Romans 5, this concept is also taught in 1 Corinthians 15:22 ("as in Adam all die, so also in Christ shall all be made alive").

innocent animal, which then bears the guilt and pays for it in death. This is why an animal sacrifice is essential. The animal does not function as an expensive payment to God: if that were all that was happening, grain and/or jewels might work. The payment view of sacrifice is explicitly rejected by God in Psalm 50:10-13. Rather, an animal is needed because it can, in some sense, be united to a person, by sharing the attribute of blood.

The picture of union is further given in the role of the priest. The priest makes atonement for the people by virtue of being united to the people. As the letter to the Hebrews put it:

For he who sanctifies and those who are sanctified all have one origin. That is why he is not ashamed to call them brothers.... Since therefore the children share in flesh and blood, he himself likewise partook of the same things, that through death he might destroy the one who has the power of death, that is, the devil, and deliver all those who through fear of death were subject to lifelong slavery. For surely it is not angels that he helps, but he helps the offspring of Abraham. Therefore he had to be made like his brothers in every respect, so that he might become a merciful and faithful high priest in the service of God, to make propitiation for the sins of the people. (Hebrews 2:11-17)

This passage clearly teaches that for Christ's sacrifice to be justly imputed to us, he had to share our nature, that is, be united to us as a brother. The priest and the people must be "one" in some real sense for the transfer of guilt from people to priest (and from priest to animal, in the Old Covenant system) to take place.

This transfer of guilt by union is also seen in the well-known passages in Isaiah which speak of the Messiah. Isaiah 53:4-6 says that he has “born our griefs” and “carried our sorrows,” and that he was “wounded for our transgressions” and “crushed for our iniquities;” further, “upon him was the chastisement that brought us healing” and “the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all;” Isaiah 53:12 says he “bore the sin of many.” The idea of transfer of guilt is clearly evident here, with the same picture as that of the scapegoat bearing the sin of people.

An earlier passage in Isaiah points further to the union of the Messiah with the people. In 49 we read a lengthy passage about the Servant, who has the role of bringing Israel back to God (49:5-6) and redeeming Israel (49:7), and even further, calling the nations as well (49:6). This Messiah is given by God to be a covenant for the people (49:8). Yet in 49:3, we read that this servant is called “Israel.” Some, in particular Jewish scholars, have argued from this that the Servant in Isaiah 49 (and 53) is the nation of Israel itself, suffering for its own sins. Yet this makes these passages incoherent: the nation of Israel becomes a covenant to redeem Israel? A more natural reading is that the Servant takes on the name of Israel by virtue of the mystical union: his death is the death of his people, and his righteousness their righteousness.

King David was a living symbol of the Messiah in the Old Testament, and Christ is the “son of David” (Matthew 1:1). Unlike Christ, David sinned, but we see the pattern of imputation through union with the Messiah in David’s sin. When David sinfully called for a census, God sent a curse on all the people (2 Samuel 24:11-17). Again, with modern eyes, we may reject this as an injustice, but the lesson is consistent: by virtue of union, the acts of the head (whether Adam or Christ for people of all nations, or David for the nation of Israel) are imputed to all the

people who are connected to them.

Finally, the concept of covenant, which undergirds the entire Bible, is itself a concept of union. As Meredith Kline pointed out<sup>11</sup>, in the unilateral covenant God made with Abraham, the father of the faithful, in Genesis 15, Abraham and his seed and God are united together in covenant, and God symbolically foreshadows the punishment of the guilt of Abraham falling on himself. The historical notion of a covenant, still maintained in treaties today, is that two parties become one, and therefore an attack on one is an attack on all—the problem of one becomes the problem of all. A covenant is not just an agreement for a time; it is a deep union. Our covenant with Christ saves us by making it just for his credit and name to be attributed to us, and our sin to be carried by him.

The positive side of this credit through alliance is seen in some of the Old Testament stories which seem the strangest to us today. In Genesis 12 and 20, Abraham sinfully passes off his wife as his sister as a way of protecting himself in the presence of powerful men. Instead of Abraham being cursed, those taking Sarah into their houses are cursed, and Abraham is sent out blessed, with gifts. Similar events happen when Jacob and David deceive others. The implication of these passages, in context, is that those who touch the apple of God's eye are cursed, and those who support them are blessed, in fulfillment of God's promise to Abraham (Genesis 12:3). The reason is not because of the virtue of these people, but because they are united to God, and therefore they are blessed by virtue of their connection to God. Often, these stories are presented

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<sup>11</sup> M.G. Kline, *Kingdom Prologue: Genesis Foundations for a Covenantal Worldview* (Wipf and Stock, 2009); *The Structure of Biblical Authority* (Wipf and Stock, 1997).

as stories of God's forgiveness of sinners, which they are, but there is something more: they are not just forgiven of sin, but are blessed wherever they go, by virtue of alliance with God.

Both in the Old Covenant and in the New Covenant, the covenant union which saves is the one which involves real spiritual union of the heart to God. As circumcision of the flesh depicted the covenant union with God outwardly, the heart change which unites us to Christ by faith is called the "circumcision of the heart" (Deuteronomy 10:16, 30:6, Jeremiah 4:4; cf. Romans 2:28-29, Philippians 3:3, Colossians 2:11). The sacrificial law of Moses teaches that a person whose heart is far from the Lord, who is unrepentant and sins "with a high hand," has no claim on the efficacy of atonement (Numbers 15:27-30); sacrifice is for repentant people (see also 1 Samuel 15:22, Psalms 19:13-14, 50:9-23, 51:17, Isaiah 1:11-18, 66:3, Jeremiah 6:19-20, Mark 12:33, and Hebrews 10:26). The image of circumcision of the heart teaches us that faith unites us to God as in a covenant, and therefore his blessings flow to us.

### **Pastoral implications**

Over the years I have met many Christian people who have struggled with self image. Their thinking goes something along these lines: God forgives my sins, and will not punish me, but he still thinks of me as a bad person. In fact, I doubt that God likes me. In such people's minds, when the Bible says that God "justifies" us, it is some legalese fiction; God does not really think of us as good.

The implication of our union with Christ is that if Christ is in us, then when God looks at us, he sees Jesus—not as a cardboard cutout placed in front of us, but Christ *in* us. If it is true that

“I have been crucified with Christ”—not merely as a mental intent to be like him, but truly, by virtue of my union with Christ—then I can say truthfully that *I* have atoned for my sins.

The pastoral question then becomes, for the person with low self esteem, “Is Christ truly in you? Are you united to him?” If so, then God can look at you and justly say that you are good, because Christ’s goodness is your goodness and Christ’s death is your atonement. This has enormous counseling implications. The subsequent consequence, that our union with Christ also leads us to a changed heart that desires to do good in the process of our sanctification, is secondary. From the moment we are united to Christ, God can declare us righteous truthfully, not merely as some legal fiction.

The doctrine of justification by the atonement of Christ and the doctrine of the necessity of being born again are both taught frequently in our churches, but often the connection between them is not clear. One way the connection is sometimes given is that we need to be born again in order to have faith, and that faith leads us to trust in the atonement of Christ. This approach says nothing of the justice of the Cross. Another way of presenting the connection is to say that we first have faith, which leads to justification, and then as a result we obtain the Spirit, and this gift of the Spirit is a necessary evidence of our faith. This approach also does not deal with the justice issue of why faith is so crucial for atonement. It is only when we realize that faith joins us to Christ, as we receive him in us and are attached to him, that the atonement makes sense as an act of both mercy and justice. It is somewhat like the mercy in C.S. Lewis’s marriage to a dying woman who needed citizenship; he was under no obligation to marry her, and she had little to offer him at the time, but once they were married, her legal status was justly accounted for.



How different from the attempts, often in Christian circles, to build people's self esteem by telling them to attempt various accomplishments, by positive reinforcement and affirmation, etc.! People know better, know that they are miserable sinners. Yet in Christ we are not merely "proclaimed" good, as a fiction; we are justly accounted as good because we are truly, in reality, bound and united to one who is good. Many of us have grasped the power of the Gospel to give us a sense of freedom, but have not understood yet its power to change our entire image of ourselves. If we account ourselves as good in truth, we have no need to put on an image, to be defensive (to defend our image from perceived attacks), to pursue endless good works as a way of thinking well of ourselves, or to run to pleasures and distractions out of a fear of looking too closely at ourselves. And I can call myself good if Christ lives in me, because he is good, and all that is his belongs to me.

## **Conclusion**

I cannot stress enough the importance of seeing the *justice* in God's imputing the righteousness of Christ to us, and our sin to Christ, by virtue of our union with Christ. God does not set aside justice in favor of mercy in the forgiveness of the Gospel; rather, he brings about justice by the mercy of being willing to attach himself personally to us. Anyone who would reject the justice of this, it would seem, would also have to reject the idea of being held accountable for paying off joint credit card debt accumulated by a spouse, to reject the justice of letting all the members of a team celebrate its victories, and to reject any sense of sharing in the accomplishments and failures of family members. The message of the Bible is clearly otherwise: union brings imputation.