

Dr. Robert A. Peterson, The Holy Spirit and Union with Christ, Session 20, Union with Christ and Systematic Theology, Church, Sacraments, and Christian Life, Hebrews through Revelation

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This is Dr. Robert Peterson in his teaching on the Holy Spirit and Union with Christ. This is session 20, Union with Christ and Systematic Theology, Church, Sacraments, Christian Life, and then Union with Christ in Hebrews through Revelation.

We continue our study of Union with Christ.

In fact, we bring it to a close, Lord willing, and we have a brief consideration of Union with Christ and Systematic Theology. We paid more attention to Union with Christ and Biblical Theology, tracing union through the Bible story. We've done quite a bit of systematizing along the way in these lectures because I'm a systematic theologian.

I can't help it. But now I want to formally just briefly remind us of some things we learned about the church and then do something on the ordinances or sacraments and a little bit on the Christian life—Union with Christ and Systematic Theology, the church.

Because Paul is Scripture's main theologian of union with Christ, we expect him to say the most about union and the church, and he does not disappoint. Nevertheless, other biblical writers have important things to say about the topic, namely Peter in his two epistles and John in his gospel, first epistle, and Revelation. I'm just going to give an outline because we covered much of this already.

The church is a living temple, as we have seen. The church abides in the Father and the Son, as we saw in our study of the Gospel of John. The church is in Christ, as we saw in Paul in lecture after lecture.

The church participates in Jesus' story, likewise. We saw it in both the Pauline texts and in our summary of his ideas. The church is the body of Christ.

The church is the bride of Christ, the same. When we looked at Paul's pictures, excuse me, of the church, we saw the body and bride of Christ as major Pauline pictures, metaphors of the church. So we turn to the sacraments or ordinances, ordinances, because they were ordained by Christ.

It was not the idea of the apostles to have baptism in the Lord's Supper. It was the idea of the Lord of the church. In Matthew 28:19 and 20, he gave the command to make disciples of all nations, which implies evangelism, to baptize them in the threefold name, and to teach the converts what Jesus had instructed them.

And at the last supper Jesus had with his disciples, the first century Jewish Passover, he instituted the Lord's Supper. So, we call them ordinances because Christ ordered them and gave them. We call them sacraments because they are holy signs that God uses to give grace to his people.

I will situate union with Christ within the contours of sacramental theology. Largely due to a study of Paul, I hold to a sacramental theology in which God, not merely human beings, acts in the lives of his people. The parallel between word and sacrament helps much.

Baptism and the Lord's Supper are visible words that portray the gospel in ceremony. Jesus wanted his church never to forget the gospel, so he built the gospel message into the two ceremonies he gave the church, Christian baptism and the Lord's Supper. The proof of that, most explicit proof, is in 1 Corinthians 11:23 where Paul says of the supper, as often as you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes.

The eating and drinking in faith is a proclamation of the atonement of Christ. Thus, the Lord's Supper and Christian baptism are visible words. They're the gospel ceremonialized so the church would never forget the gospel.

Jesus graciously ministers the gospel to his church via the preached word and via the visible words of baptism and communion. I understand the parallel of the word sacrament, as follows: Because they are two forms of the word of God, scripture ascribes efficacy to both written word, 2 Timothy 3:15, the word of God that Timothy heard from his mother and grandmother, is able to save when united by faith, and to the sacraments.

Acts 2:39 connects baptism and forgiveness, as does 22:16 of Acts. 1 Corinthians 10:16 connects union with Christ to the Lord's Supper. 1 Peter 3:21 flatly says baptism now saves you.

But the sacraments do not save in and of themselves, that is, by the mere performance of the act. Baptized persons are not automatically saved. Persons taking the Lord's Supper do not automatically have eternal life.

The sacraments do not save in and of themselves any more than the word does. Merely hearing the word does not save. People are saved not merely by hearing the

word, but by putting their faith in the Christ who comes to them in the word, preached or read.

Romans 10:17, faith comes by hearing, and hearing the word about Christ. Similarly, neither being baptized nor receiving the Lord's Supper automatically saves. But when someone believes the gospel, whether communicated through preaching or through the ordinances, he or she is saved.

For example, people have believed in Christ for salvation as they observe the Supper with the words of institution. For there, the Lord's death is proclaimed. 1 Corinthians 11:26, I believe I said 23 before.

God works through both words and ordinances. However, the word is necessary for salvation. I'm making an important qualification here.

The word is necessary for salvation, and the sacraments are not absolutely necessary for salvation. The word is necessary for salvation, while the ordinances are not. 1 Corinthians 1:14-17, Paul says, I thank the Lord I baptize none of you.

Can you imagine Paul saying, I thank the Lord I preach the gospel to none of you? It's impossible. He was glad he didn't baptize them because they already were dividing into factions. And surely, if Paul had literally baptized some people, they'd be in the Paul group.

Even as our response to the preached word is important, so is our response to the gospel in the ordinances. Baptized persons who walk away from the faith are not saved. They bring condemnation on themselves.

Persons who take communion and reject its message reach judgment, which is exactly what Paul says in 1 Corinthians 11:27-32. Many of you are weak. Some of you are weak. Some of you are sick, and some of you sleep.

It's a euphemism for death. God was bringing temporal judgment on the Corinthian believers, not eternal judgment, however, because the next verse says, and I better get it, read it to make it right, that when this happens, they're being disciplined by the Lord so that they would not be condemned with the world. So those judgments I just mentioned, that is why some of you, many of you, 1 Corinthians 11:30, are weak and ill, and some have died.

The ESV translates the figure as having slept or fallen asleep. But if we judged ourselves, we would not be judged. But when we are judged by the Lord, we are disciplined so that we may not be condemned along with the world.

Those are temporal judgments, weakness, sickness, and death. Strong medicine from the Lord, but still saving his people because he's angry at them for they were misrepresenting in their lives the very message of the supper, which, as we saw, is vertical union with Christ, participation in his body and blood via believing participation in the elements, and then horizontal union with one another. We are all one body, for we all partake of the one loaf as it's passed around the congregation.

But they were not being one with other believers. Some were eating elaborate dinners and letting their fellows starve at the agape, the fellowship meal associated with the Lord's Supper in Corinth. Paul is not happy at all, and God is bringing his temporal judgments on his people to correct them.

Who is the main worker in preaching and administering the ordinances? Any evangelical preacher would affirm he is merely a spokesman for God, the main preacher, capital P, working through him. Second Corinthians 5:20, we plead with you on behalf of God, Christ, behalf of God, be reconciled to God. Second Corinthians 5:20, let me get it right, therefore we are ambassadors for Christ, God making his appeal through us, we implore you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God.

That is God making his appeal through the apostles. And so, it is in a derivative sense with the preacher of the gospel. The preacher preaches the gospel, but God is making his offer of eternal life and forgiveness through the human preacher, who is merely his spokesperson.

If anyone did not believe that, he would stop preaching. God is also the main minister, capital M, of the sacraments. It is not the human being who baptizes or serves the Lord's Supper who gives grace.

It is God who works through the visible word in baptism and supper to make promises to his people to which they must respond. God makes a promise in the visible words of the Lord's Supper and fulfills his promise when it is met by faith. The mere performance of the sacramental act does not save.

I thus reject both Roman Catholic and Lutheran understandings of the Eucharist. It is a mistake to focus on the bread and wine. Instead, the focus belongs on Christ, who loved us and gave himself for us.

He grants grace from heaven through the Holy Spirit. The Spirit is the nexus, the connection between the ascended seated Christ and faithful partakers. The Spirit truly and spiritually, but not physically, conveys the benefits of Christ's atonement to believing participants.

The Supper is thus a Christ-ordained means by which he gives grace to believing partakers. Sinclair Ferguson, in his very good book on the Holy Spirit, deserves a quote. Quote, the role of the Spirit is so vital in the Supper.

Only by understanding his work can we avoid falling into the mistakes that have dogged both Catholic, capital C, ex opere operato, by the mere performing of the work, grace is given, and evangelical memorialist understandings of the Supper. It is a bare symbol, and no grace is really communicated. It is not by the Church's administration or merely by the activity of our memories, but through the Spirit that we enjoy communion with Christ, crucified, risen, and now exalted.

For Christ is not localized in the bread and wine, the Catholic view, nor is he absent from the Supper as though our highest activity were remembering him, the memorialist view. Rather, he is known through the elements by the Spirit. There is a genuine communion with Christ in the Supper.

Just as in the preaching of the Word, he is present not in the Bible locally or by believing but by the ministry of the Spirit. So, he is also present in the Supper, not in the bread and wine, but by the power of the Spirit. The body and blood of Christ are not enclosed in the elements since he is at the right hand of the Father, Acts 3:21. But by the power of the Spirit, we are brought into his presence, and he stands among us.

I affirm that Baptism and the Lord's Supper hold their most basic, comprehensive, and profound meaning in common, union with Christ. This raises a problem. If both Baptism and the Supper signify union with Christ, what is the difference between them? Is communion merely a repetition of Baptism? The answer to these questions lies in distinguishing the initial union with Christ, signified in Baptism, from the ongoing union with Christ, signified in communion.

This prompts more questions. Is our initial union with Christ insufficient and in need of augmenting? What does the Supper do that Baptism does not? The answers here lie in understanding that our once-for-all-time union with Christ, signified in Baptism, is strengthened and invigorated. Calvin, I tried to reach for some lectures ago, but I couldn't find them.

Our once-for-all-time union with Christ signified in Baptism, is strengthened and invigorated by partaking of the Lord's Supper in faith. We understand this better if we compare it to forgiveness. We receive forgiveness from Christ once and for all, a conversion, yet we receive daily forgiveness from him as we confess our sins.

An illustration from marriage helps. We're married permanently. No divorce is permitted in this illustration.

We do not get married again as we have loved our spouses and have had fellowship with them over the years. Our wedding day is not the end but the beginning of a lifelong relationship that grows as we communicate and walk together. It is the same in our spiritual lives.

God joins us to his Son once and for all when we trust Christ as he is offered in the Gospel. But our relationship with him grows as we love him, walk with him, and do his will. Matheson, summarizing Calvin's view, is succinct.

The Sacrament of Baptism is connected with the believer's initial union with Christ. The Sacrament of the Lord's Supper is connected with the believer's ongoing union with Christ. In the Lord's Supper, the believer is nourished and sustained, and his communion and union with Christ is strengthened and increased.

Matheson's book on the Lord's Supper is given for you. Our last aspect of the Christian, of the systematic theology, vis-a-vis union with Christ, is the Christian life. And here, we've actually said much along the way.

I want to tie some things together. Union with Christ is revealed in Scripture and yet transcends human understanding. It is a general term for the plan of salvation from eternity to eternity, from election to resurrection.

It's also a specific term for the application of salvation because actual union can occur only with actual people. It is both the umbrella over all the aspects of the application of salvation and the glue that holds them together. Union with Christ's impact on the Christian life is enormous.

It constitutes Christian identity. Believers are in Christ, intimately related to him in salvation. The union between Christ and Christians is brought about by the Holy Spirit and is comprehensive, vital, and permanent.

Believers are corporately and individually joined to Christ. Astonishingly, they and the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit mutually indwell one another. By grace through faith, they participate in Jesus' story from his crucifixion to his second coming.

And only then will their identity be made fully known. Union with Christ means belonging to Christ. The Holy Spirit's most important work in salvation, as we said at the beginning of these lectures, is to unite us to Jesus Christ, the mediator of the new covenant.

As a result, he belongs to us, and we to him forever. Because we belong to Christ, we have fellowship with him, akin to the intimate fellowship of wife and husband. We are Christ's bride, and he loves us dearly.

Consequently, we are indwelt by the Holy Trinity, especially the Holy Spirit. Union with Christ means present suffering and future glory. Because we are identified with him in his death, we share in his sufferings.

We are saved by grace through faith and persevere in the same way, by grace through faith. God strengthens his people when they suffer, and they endure to the end. Mysterially, his grace enables their perseverance, and they actively persevere themselves.

As a result, authentic believers do not turn away from Christ totally and finally. Instead, they continue in the faith and ultimately will share in the glory of Christ's resurrection. As surely as they suffered with him, they will reign with him on the new earth forever.

To God be the glory. I have some more biblical material that has to do with the union with Christ in the rest of the New Testament after Paul. Union with Christ in Hebrews, in 1st and 2nd Peter, in 1 John, and then briefly in the book of Revelation.

Union with Christ in Hebrews. Though the matter is debated, I view Hebrews 3:14 as pertaining to union with Christ. When the writer pens, we have come to share in Christ.

If indeed we hold our original confidence firm to the end, he is saying more that we are Christ's companions or partners. He is saying that we share in Christ. We partake of him.

Other instances of the word the writer uses in Hebrews 3:14, sharers or partakers, *metakoi*, bear this out. You who share in a heavenly calling, 3:1. Those who have shared in the Holy Spirit, 6:4. Discipline in which all have participated, 12:8. The writer teaches then that we share in who Christ is and what he has accomplished for us. That means we partake of the son of God and his saving benefits.

By God's grace through faith, we participate in his person and work. This truth plays an important role in Hebrews and can do the same for our lives today. The original reader of Hebrews, original readers of Hebrews, whom the writer repeatedly exhorts to persevere in trying circumstances, need encouragement to do so.

The writer provides this encouragement at key places, even amidst the warnings, see 6:9 and 10:39. And 3:14 provides great encouragement. To those tempted to quit the Christian marathon because of dire temptations and the hardening effects of sin, the writer proclaims, quote, we have come to share in Christ. If indeed we hold our original confidence firm to the end, to close, quote, Christ's church around the world needs to hear these same words today.

Union with Christ in 1 and 2 Peter. Peter depicts believers in Christ, the living stone, as living stones themselves when they come to him in service. 1 Peter 2:4. They are living because they have come in contact with the living stone and received eternal life from him who died for them and arose by virtue of union with Christ.

They receive resurrection life and are born anew. 1:2. 1:23. God uses these living stones to build a spiritual house where believer priests worship God through Christ. 1 Peter 2:5. Peter's image of the church as a spiritual temple conveys the ideas of both individual and communal union with Christ.

Having previously told of Christ's suffering and glory in 1:11, 4:13, and 5:1, Peter now applies Christ's suffering and glory to Christians. Already, quote, already you have suffered. God who has called you to his eternal glory in Christ will himself restore, confirm, strengthen, and establish you.

5:10. Even as Christ suffered and entered into his glory, Christians follow him. The God of all grace will enable the suffering believers whom Peter addresses to endure to the end, where they will receive eternal glory in the resurrection. God has summoned his people to his eternal glory in Christ.

Verse 10. Taking in Christ to go with glory, I understand Peter to mean God will bring us to his eternal glory through Christ the mediator. Best, Ernest Best sums up Peter's message.

Believers are members of Christ's church and are assured of final participation in his glory, quote, only because of God's activity in and through Christ. Peter, a fellow elder and witness of the sufferings of Christ as well as a partaker in the glory that's going to be revealed from 5:1, those words come. Peter prays that God would grant his readers peace in the midst of their fiery trial.

4:12. He concludes his epistle with these words, quote, peace to all of you who are in Christ. 5:14. Similarly to Paul, Peter includes an in-Christ reference in his final greeting. He grants peace to all his readers who are in Christ.

In Christ here not only means Christian but also speaks of Peter's readers' new relationship with Christ, their spiritual bond with him. Peter Davids ties together Peter's three uses of in Christ language when he says of Peter's audience, quote, their good lifestyle, 3:16, their future hope, 5:10, and their present peace are all due to their relationship with Christ, their identity with him. David's letters of 2 Peter and Jude.

Peter famously said that through God's precious and very great promises, you may become partakers of the divine nature, 2 Peter 1:4. These words do not obliterate the distinction between God and his creatures. The apostle does not mean that we

become God or part of God. Rather, when he writes about becoming partakers of the divine nature, he speaks of Christians sharing in some of God's moral excellence.

Verse three. The very next words confirm his interpretation, for Peter adds, having escaped from the corruption that is in the world because of sinful desire. Close quote, verse four.

Participating in God's nature means escaping from the world's corruption. God wills for believers to share in the moral qualities of Christ. Although these moral qualities will be perfected in us only at the second coming, even now through the indwelling spirit, we are enabled to be like God to a degree.

Union with Christ in 1 John. 1 John has much to do, much to teach us concerning union with Christ. Revisiting expressions of union from his gospel, John employs two metaphors for union in his first epistle.

First, he speaks of God or Christ being in us and of our being in Christ. Second, he says we abide in Christ or God and that Christ or God abides in us. God or Christ is in us, and we are in Christ.

Once, 1 John says God or Christ is in you. Four, four. The context warns of spiritual warfare.

It tells of the spirit of the Antichrist that energizes false prophets who deny the son's incarnation. Verses one to three of 1 John four. John's readers are not to cower in fear, for their mighty victor has overcome the enemy for them.

As a result, "you have overcome them for he who is in you is greater than he who is in the world—verse four. Neither John or his readers are to put their confidence in themselves. Rather, their victory is assured because of Christ's accomplishment in his death and resurrection and because of his presence in their lives. It is this powerful overcoming presence that John points to when he says he who is in you is greater than he who is in the world."

Christ is stronger than Satan and Antichrist and has overcome them. Moreover, this conquering Christ indwells his people, assuring them of eventual victory through his almighty presence. Twice, referring to Jesus, 1 John says we are in him.

1 John 2:4-6. 1 John 5:20. The expression we are in him, Jesus, is equivalent to we have eternal life or we know the son.

There are three of 1 John's ways of talking about possessing salvation. To be in, to be an authentic believer is to be in the son. To exist in union with him.

In the first passage, being in him is inseparable from obeying God. In the second passage, being in him is correlative with knowing Christ cognitively and personally. Yarbrough's words bear repeating, quote, to be in Christ or God as 1 John depicts the state is to know God the Father fully through relationship to him via the son.

Is to have the father living in oneself, doing his work. To be in the son of God is a *sine qua non* of salvation, according to 1 John.

I have already finished the quote for Yarbrough. It presupposes being indwelt by the son, which means dwelling in or being in him. This takes us back to the fourth gospel's exalted teaching of mutual indwelling, which is an aspect of the second metaphor for union in John.

Yarbrough's commentary on John's letters was what I was referring to, Robert Yarbrough—abiding in Christ or God and Christ or God abiding in us. First, John also speaks of the union in terms of abiding.

Frequently, John speaks of believers abiding in Christ, which has moral ramifications. The one who claims to abide in Christ ought to follow Jesus' example, 2:6. Similarly, John explains, quote, no one who abides in him keeps on sinning, 3:6. Twice in short compass, John commands Christians to abide in Christ. The first time this command is attached to the teaching of believers by the Holy Spirit, his anointing, 2:27. The second time, obeying this command prepares believers for the return of Christ, 2:28. Once John announces that if they persist in the truth that they were taught when they first believed the gospel, they will abide, quote, in the son and in the father, 1 John 2:24. This is the only time Christians are said to continue in more than one divine person.

All of this should be viewed as an extension and application of John's teaching on abiding in the gospel of John. Yarbrough summarizes accurately. Abiding, "has come to be almost ubiquitous shorthand in 1 John for believers' habitual personal attachment to Christ. For example, 2:6 and 28. Or for the presence in believers of God's saving truth. For example, 2:24, 2:27, 3:9."

Yarbrough, 1 through 3 John is the name of his commentary. With this profound personal relationship with God in Christ come the ethical obligations we observed above. John does not endorse easy believism.

To the contrary, 1 John is ethically rigorous. John raises believers' personal relationship with God in Christ and the corresponding ethical responsibilities to a higher level by teaching that abiding is reciprocal between God and his people. Twice 1 John says God abides in us, 3:24, 4:12. Four times it speaks of this abiding with God as reciprocal.

Whoever keeps his commandments abides in God and God abides in him, 1 John 3:24. By this we know we abide in him and he in us because he has given us of his spirit, 4:13. Whoever confesses that Jesus is the Christ, is the son of God, abides in him and he in God. I'll do that one again. Whoever confesses that Jesus is the son of God, God abides in him and he in God, 4:15. God is love and whoever abides in love abides in God and God abides in him, 4:16. Those four references to abiding with God as reciprocal are 3:24, 4:13, 4:15, 4:16. 1 John 3:24 assumes an important role because here, for the first time, we encounter mutual abiding between God and Christians.

We not only enjoy such a personal and intimate relationship with Christ, but he also has such a relationship with us. This is the amazing truth of believers sharing in a certain sense by grace through faith in the divine perichoresis or mutual indwelling we found in John's gospel. And, of course, such a privilege carries ethical connotations.

John combines mutual abiding language with moral obligation. Reciprocal abiding is true of those characterized by obedience to God's commands, 1 John 3:24. Confession that Jesus is God's son, 4:15 and continuance in love, 3:14. For the sake of study, we separate speaking of God or Christ being in us and of our being in Christ from studying John's, from John saying we abide in Christ or God and that Christ or God abides in us. But now it's time to admit that the two are basically synonymous as Raymond Brown indicates, quote, the expressions to be in and to abide in are almost interchangeable.

It is worthwhile to address one more topic, the role of the Holy Spirit in believers abiding. Twice John speaks of this, 3:24 and 4:12 and 13. While John does not attribute to the Holy Spirit as large a role as he plays in Paul's thought, he does play a minor role in 1 John.

In the two texts above, the Spirit's ministry is to make Christians aware of their abiding in Christ. Yarbrough helpfully underscores this truth and I quote, John and his readers know or recognize their abiding in God and his abiding in them by virtue of the Spirit whom God has given them, see 2:18 to 3:8. This is similar to the statement John already made in 3:24. The Spirit is the link, even agent, who permits believers to see this reciprocity for what it is, a token of God's very presence among them, assuring them of the veracity of the message they have received and the importance of the ethic they are being called to embrace, Yarbrough, 1 through 3 John—lastly, a few words about the union with Christ in the book of Revelation.

Following on the heels of strong words about hell and a call for believers to persevere in 14:9 through 12, John delivers comforting words. Revelation 14, some of the strongest words in scripture concerning eternal punishment are here in Revelation 14:9 through 12, a third angel brings a message from God.

If anyone worships the beast and its image and receives a mark on his forehead or on his hand, he will also drink the wine of God's wrath, poured full strength into the cup of his eyes, and he'll be tormented with fire, and sulfur in the presence of the holy angels and in the presence of the lamb. And the smoke of their torment goes up forever and ever, and they have no rest day or night, these worshipers of the beast and its image, and whoever receives the mark or its name. After those strong words, John delivers comforting words.

In between, he says one more thing. Here is a call for the endurance of the saints, those who keep the commandments of God and their faith in Jesus. And here come the comforting words.

And I heard a voice from heaven saying, write this, blessed are the dead who die in the Lord from now on. Blessed indeed, says the spirit, blessed indeed, says the spirit, that they may rest from their labors, for their deeds follow them. John contrasts the blessed rest of believers from their labors, verse 13, with the never-ending lack of rest for lost persons.

At first blush, John's words are puzzling. Blessed are the dead, verse 13. But by the time we reflect on the whole sentence, our bewilderment turns to joy.

Blessed are the dead who die in the Lord from now on. The context just juxtaposes two realms, heaven and hell, hell and heaven to be more exact, and their occupants. In light of the sufferings of hell and the joys of heaven, John uses in the Lord in a manner resembling Paul's in Christ language.

Beasley Murray hits the nail on the head. Quote: death has lost its terror for the dead who die in the Lord, for they are united to him who, by his death and resurrection, conquered death for them. Revelation 14, 13 does not mark out a special group of believers, but describes them all.

This text is often quoted at believers' funerals, for it quote, pronounces blessed those who meet death in a state of spiritual union with Christ Jesus, as Robert Mounce explains in his commentary on the book of Revelation. Perhaps it is fitting to close these lectures with a word of thanksgiving. Gracious Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, we thank you for a great salvation that, in fact, is greater than we can even comprehend.

We thank you for joining us, dear Father, to your Son. We thank you, Holy Spirit, for doing that work in us, and we thank you that it claims us as your people, actually applying grace to us now and forever. We rejoice in our union with Christ.

We pray for grace to live grateful, holy, and loving lives. And we give you praise through Jesus Christ, our Lord, in the power of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

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