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TEACHING THE SIGNIFICANCE OF THE BELIEVER'S UNION
WITH CHRIST TO THE MEMBERS OF GRACE FELLOWSHIP
CHURCH IN HAZLETON, PENNSYLVANIA

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TEACHING THE SIGNIFICANCE OF THE BELIEVER'S UNION
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To my wife, Amanda. Thank you for your loving sacrifice of time and energy for my studies. You have been a constant helpmate in my ministry and studies.

I could not do it without you.

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PREFACE

This project was completed through the loving encouragement of the many people God has placed in my life. I am grateful foremost to my Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ, and that God sees me “in him.” I thank the Lord for giving me a loving family who has helped me to learn the blessings of being “in Christ.” To my father, Joel, who passed away while I was working on this project. I am thankful you were a faithful model of my Heavenly Father and loved me as a son. To my mother, Teresa, thank you for raising me to love Christ, the benefits of which I am only beginning to grasp. Thank you to my children, Hayden, Grace, and Charlotte for the joy and support you have brought your father. Most of all, I am thankful for my dear wife, Amanda. Your love, support, and encouragement have helped me to persevere. You are a blessing and a true gift from God.

Thanks to Parker Goforth for his friendship and encouragement. I am grateful to all my fellow elders at GFC and especially Dionardo Medina who completed the program concurrently with me. Brother, you were a constant source of support. Thank you for your prayers, discussions, and encouragement.

I am thankful for the privilege of serving the Lord with the body of Christ at Grace Fellowship Church. You are a gift from God. You have been a loving family to me these thirteen years. Thank you for allowing me to undertake this endeavor. I pray the sacrifice bears fruit in your lives unto eternity. In Christ.

Joseph Chad Bennett

Hazleton, Pennsylvania

May 2023

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Every Christian has developed some understanding of who he is and his identity. Too often, that identity is shaped by his present circumstances or past experiences. The Bible is clear that the Christian is united to Christ. This union with Christ defines how God views the Christian and should determine how he views himself. In John 15:5, Jesus says, “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.”¹ Defining identity according to present circumstances and past experiences is far from abiding in Christ and is spiritually detrimental to believers. This project intends to provide a biblical understanding of the significance of the believer’s union with Christ and the blessings that flow from this union to help the members of Grace Fellowship Church in Hazleton, Pennsylvania, to find their identity in Christ.

Context

Grace Fellowship Church (GFC) in Hazleton, Pennsylvania, began as a Reformed Baptist church plant in 1968. The town of Hazleton is in northeast Pennsylvania, a region important for its abundance of anthracite coal. The city flourished until the decline of the use of coal after World War II. Coal mining was a difficult job demanding long hours in a hazardous work environment. The nature of the work and the small wages contributed to poverty and brokenness in families. Many suffered from mental health issues, and heavy alcohol and tobacco consumption was common. This was

¹ All Scripture passages are from the *English Standard Version* unless otherwise noted.

exacerbated by the decline of the coal industry and, with it, the town's economy. The brokenness continues today and has impacted most of the families that make up the church.

In a recent survey, 43 percent of people in Luzerne County, where GFC is located, identified as Roman Catholic.² Many of the members of GFC come from a Catholic background emphasizing good works and man's righteousness. Some of this mentality inevitably continues in new believers and can be hard to move away from. One of the disadvantages of this is that people are generally expected to be good and then laden with guilt when confronted with their failures, either by others or internally. When their expectations about themselves or their circumstances fail to measure up to their set standards, it is easy to slip into depression. In addition, the brokenness and sin in families means that many have faced physical, sexual, or verbal abuse that only intensifies this struggle.

Since GFC was founded, it has emphasized sound theology and expository preaching. One of the church's strengths is the members' solid theological training. This depth of understanding of the Bible has done much to help them battle against misunderstandings and poor teaching in the past. One realization that has become clear to the leaders of GFC is that head knowledge and intellectual assent do not always equate to a life change. While the members may affirm truths preached and taught, putting these into practice can be far more challenging. This is especially true when biblical truth is battling against years of abuse and false teaching. Solid teaching has been a tremendous help for many of the church's members, but the elders believe there is a need for additional training to address this struggle. Members need a theological basis to understand their standing that can be referenced continually in their Christian life.

² Clifford Grammich et al., *2010 U.S. Religion Census: Religious Congregations & Membership Study* (Lenexa, KS: Association of Statisticians of American Religious Bodies, 2012).

Given the common struggles mentioned above, the church developed a counseling ministry to help members overcome personal struggles. For over thirty years this counseling has helped many people in the church and the community. Some people were drawn to the church for the professional level of counseling. In seeking to serve the community's emotionally and spiritually needy, the church drew in additional people with similar needs. While the need for counseling at GFC has not declined, participation has gradually declined and is now done with less frequency, with fewer people equipped to counsel. One way of addressing this deficiency might be to train more individuals to help with counseling, given the extensive need in the body. While there is nothing wrong with this approach and, to some extent, it will likely be one way that GFC seeks to address this weakness, the elders are hoping to address it in other ways as well. Another way this can be accomplished is by developing a discipleship study focused upon a general area of weakness in the believers to strengthen them and meet this counseling need. This will help the members address some of the common struggles facing them and equip them to help others.

One of the recurring problems I have observed over the thirteen years I have served GFC has been about identity. This is not particularly surprising given the town's background and the church's constituency. This became especially apparent a few years ago when the church was doing a small group study through the book of Hosea. This particular group was comprised of eleven adults. The group leader noticed that as he spoke of God as a Father and his love for his people, there were many blank stares. Through subsequent questions, the leader was able to ascertain that of the eleven adults, he was the only one with a father who in any way modeled God as a Father. The other group members had fathers who had physically, emotionally, or even sexually abused them. Some of them had fathers who were alcoholics. At least one had a father who abandoned him and the family at a young age. What was significant about this interaction was how these past experiences affected the individuals involved. Each of them, in some

way, was still impacted by this in relation to how they viewed themselves and God. It was difficult for any of them to accept God as a good and loving Father and that they are his loved children. Intellectually this could be acknowledged, but it had not changed their view of God or self.

In reflecting on counseling sessions and other discussions with members, it became clear to the elders of GFC that this struggle was not limited to understanding God as Father. Much of the church's counseling addressed how the experience of church members in the past or even in the present defined how they viewed themselves and God. There appears to be a clear pattern of defining their identity in relation to their circumstances. Many see their jobs, or their marriage as defining their identity. As a result, their identity is adversely affected when they lose their job, or their marriage falls apart. Still, others define their identity through their past struggles or abuse. These experiences leave them feeling worthless or unworthy of love affecting every relationship in their life. The effects are felt in every aspect of their life: from marriage to parenting, work to private sin struggles. This problem is especially prevalent at GFC because of the reasons previously listed. Much of the biblical counseling GFC offered has addressed specific past or present struggles that relate to how the Christian views himself rather than imparting a robust understanding of Christian identity based on union with Christ.

Rationale

Based on this context, this project will address various related weaknesses at GFC. The first weakness to be addressed is the influence of circumstances and experiences in defining the believer's identity. There is a need for the members of GFC to have a biblical foundation for understanding their identity so that they may battle against the false understandings that are so prevalent. The course will help members to understand their identity in light of their union with Christ. Rather than basing their view of self on their experiences or circumstances, they can base it on a biblical understanding

of who they are in Christ.

Second, this project will address a need for more understanding of critical biblical passages concerning union with Christ. The New Testament abounds with references to the Christian's union with Christ. The believer in Christ (1 Cor 1:30), and Christ is in him (2 Cor 13:5). Every aspect of salvation is in and through Christ. In Him, Christian's are elected (Eph 1:4–5), called (1 Cor 1:9), made alive (Eph 2:5), justified (Rom 8:1), sanctified (1 Cor 1:2), and ultimately glorified (Rom 8:30). Christians are baptized into Christ and His death (Rom 6:3), crucified with Him (Gal 2:20, Rom 6:6), buried with Him (Col 2:12, Rom 6:4), united with Him in the resurrection (Rom 6:5), and seated with Him in the heavenly places (Eph 2:6). One of the most encouraging truths in the Bible is that God is a Father to the Christian. Still, even this truth is an out-flowing of the believer's union with Christ. The christian is adopted as a child because he is united to Christ the Son of God (Gal 3:26). Christians are even created in Christ (Eph 2:10) and recreated in Him (2 Cor 5:17). Paul counts his previous achievements as rubbish compared to gaining Christ and being found in Him (Phil 3:8–9). This is a model of how Christians should view even their achievements as incomparable to the blessings that they possess already in Christ. It also shows how Christians should think about and value the privilege of union with Christ. Unfortunately, this understanding has been neglected and needs to be re-taught, especially in the current context. Through teaching and reflective questions, this project will help the members of GFC to reshape their Christian identity in line with the Bible as they understand the significance of union with Christ.

Third, this project will address a weakness in the theological understanding of union with Christ. The Christian's union with Christ ultimately defines his identity. How God views the Christian is through Christ. The doctrine of union with Christ was once an important doctrine in the church but is more neglected today. One reason for this may be the mystical nature of this union that causes Christians and even ministers to shy away from it. This neglect of the doctrine has only increased the struggle to understand

Christian identity. Careful theological teaching on the doctrine of union with Christ will help the members of GFC to appreciate and rest in their standing in Christ.

Finally, this project will help to address a weakness and need in biblical counseling at GFC. While it will not replace the need for biblical counseling in the church, it will help to lighten the load and equip members to address one of the common and recurring struggles they face. The course can be revisited and even reproduced among the church members. This is one way the elders of GFC can “equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ . . . to mature manhood, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ” (Eph 4:12–13).

Purpose

The purpose of this project is to teach the significance of the believers’ union with Christ to the members of Grace Fellowship Church in Hazleton, Pennsylvania.

Goals

The following three goals were established in order to accomplish the above-stated purpose:

1. The first goal was to assess the current understanding of union with Christ and Christian identity among the members of GFC.
2. The second goal was to develop an eight-session course on how union with Christ shapes the Christian’s identity.
3. The third goal was to increase members’ understanding of the believer’s identity in Christ through this curriculum.

A research methodology was created for this project that measured the successful completion of these three goals.³ This methodology is described in the following section.

³ All of the research instruments used in this project were performed in compliance with and approved by The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary Research Ethics Committee prior to use in the ministry project.

Research Methodology

Three goals will determine the effectiveness of this project. The first goal was to assess the current understanding of union with Christ and Christian identity among the members of GFC. This goal was measured by administering the Understanding of Christian Identity Survey (UCIS) to at least twelve adults of GFC. Participants were asked to create a unique four-digit pin number which was used for the pre-and post-surveys. This survey was administered in a Sunday school setting prior to goals 2 and 3 and at least two weeks before beginning the curriculum. This goal was considered successfully met when at least twelve adults completed the UCIS and their responses were analyzed using descriptive statistics to gain a clearer insight into their understanding of Christian identity.

The second goal was to develop an eight-session course on how union with Christ shapes the Christian's identity. The curriculum began with an introduction to the significance of the doctrine of union with Christ, then addressed the subject of identity, followed by six sessions which each addressed one of the blessings that flow out of this union and defines the Christian's identity. This goal was measured by a theological panel which utilized a rubric to evaluate the curriculum's biblical faithfulness, scope, and applicability. The panel was comprised of two GFC elders, GFC's pastor emeritus and his wife, and one pastor outside of GFC. This goal was considered successfully met when a minimum of 90 percent of the evaluation criterion met or exceeded the sufficient level. If the initial feedback yielded less than the 90 percent benchmark, the material was to be revised until it met or exceeded the sufficient level.

The third goal was to increase members' understanding of the believer's identity in Christ through this curriculum. This goal was measured by administering the UCIS a second time after completion of the curriculum to the same adult members of GFC. This post-curriculum survey was used to measure the change in the understanding of identity among the members of GFC. This goal was successfully met when the t-test

for dependent samples demonstrated a positive statistically significant difference in the pre- and post-survey scores.

Definitions and Limitations/Delimitations

Certain terms used throughout this ministry project are defined below to aid the reader's understanding of the subject.

Union with Christ. In its most basic meaning, union with Christ is the reality that Christians are in Christ. Being “in Christ” means that “Christ represents those who place their faith in him. If we are united to Christ, then we are united to him in all that he has done for us.”⁴ Union with Christ is then the means of receiving all the benefits and blessings of Christ. Union with Christ is a special relationship believers have to Jesus, in which they are counted as one with Christ. A. J. Spence provides a more nuanced definition:

our union with Christ has its foundations in the loving purpose of a covenanting God; is established by the saving ministry of his incarnate Son; is entered into through the outward (sacramental) response of an inner trusting faith in the promises of the gospel; sanctifies us by transforming us into the likeness of Jesus as the Spirit baptizes us into his life and privileges; and introduces us to an intimate loving relationship with Christ, and through him to the Father, which we shall experience through time and eternity.⁵

Christian identity. Christian identity is the unique way a Christian views his identity. Cornelis Bennema has given a helpful definition of identity, “Identity has to do with who one is—a notion of self (personhood), or the set of qualities, values, characteristics and behaviour that distinguishes a person from others.”⁶

⁴ Rankin Wilbourne, *Union with Christ: The Way to Know and Enjoy God* (Colorado Springs, CO: David C Cook, 2016), 44–45.

⁵ Spence, A. J. “Union with Christ,” in *New Dictionary of Theology* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 1988), 932.

⁶ Cornelis Bennema, “‘Union with Christ’ in the Johannine Writings,” in *In Christ Alone: Perspectives on Union with Christ*, ed. Stephen Clark and Matthew Evans (Fearn, Scotland: Christian Focus, 2016), 34.

Three limitations applied to this project. First, the curriculum was taught in adult Sunday school, which tends to be attended by some of the stronger and more faithful believers who may find the material the least helpful. To mitigate this limitation, several people who could benefit the most from the curriculum were encouraged in advance to attend the classes. Second, the effectiveness of the training was limited by the consistency of attendance. If participants did not attend all the sessions, the efficacy of the teaching was diminished. To mitigate this limitation, participants were encouraged in advance to commit to attending 85 percent of the sessions, and notes with study questions were provided for any session missed. Third, a recent schedule change at GFC meant that twice during the course of the study, adult Sunday school did not meet so the church could gather for the Lord's Supper and a meal together. To mitigate this limitation, participants were encouraged to review their handouts and recorded messages during off weeks.

One delimitation applied to this project. The curriculum was confined to eight lessons. The selected length was short enough to encourage participant commitment while being long enough to cover necessary subjects and material and effectively measure results.

Conclusion

God has graciously united every Christian to Christ. This union defines his identity and is the source of all the spiritual blessings he receives. Understanding this truth is of great benefit to the members of GFC and the church as a whole in fighting against wrong views of identity stemming from their past experiences or present circumstance. Union with Christ provides the believer with a foundation for spiritual growth. The doctrine is emphasized throughout the New Testament. Chapter 2 of this project demonstrates the biblical and theological significance of the believer's union with Christ.

CHAPTER 2

THE BIBLICAL AND THEOLOGICAL BASIS FOR FINDING THE BELIEVERS' IDENTITY IN HIS UNION WITH CHRIST

In the modern era there has been an increasing focus on the self and existential questions of identity. For the believer, such questions are addressed in God's Word, specifically through the believer's union with Christ. The Bible reveals that the Christian's union with Christ defines his identity and is the source of all spiritual blessings which he enjoys. A careful study of several New Testament passages demonstrates this point. Ephesians 2:1–22 shows that the believer is united to Christ by faith, which defines his identity. Ephesians 1:3–10 reveals that union with Christ is the source of every spiritual blessing the believer enjoys. In Philippians 3:1–11, Paul demonstrates that his union with Christ shaped his identity and that he treasured it greatly. In John 15:1–11, Jesus commands believers to abide in this union with him.

Paul's Language of Union with Christ

Paul uses the phrase “in Christ” (ἐν Χριστῷ) seventy-three times. The number rises to close to 170 occurrences when including other ways Paul expresses union with or participation in Christ (e.g., “in him,” “with Christ,” “through Christ”). At other times, Paul may be speaking of union with Christ without using any of these phrases.¹ Concerning Paul's use of the phrase “in Christ,” Campbell observes that “its prevalence on every page of his writings demonstrates his proclivity for the concept, and yet

¹ Constantine R. Campbell, *Paul and Union with Christ: An Exegetical and Theological Study* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2012), 24.

nowhere does he directly explain what he means by it.”² This has made it difficult to narrow down the meaning of union with Christ in Paul. A. J. Spence, in his article “Union with Christ” in the *New Dictionary of Theology*, gives six ways the church has understood union with Christ.³ The scope of the paper is to explore the various blessings that the Christian enjoys through his union with Christ, which will include elements of each of the various ways the church has understood it. In explaining Paul’s usage of the expression “in Christ,” M. A. Seifrid argues, “the variety of ways in which the phrases appear in Paul’s letters indicates that they serve as a flexible idiom which may express instrumentality or mode of action as well as locality . . . The expression is used over a triangular field of meaning rather than in a single, ‘technical’ sense.”⁴ While the distinctions of locality, instrumentality, and modality may help understand individual passages, the flexibility of meaning Paul gives to the idiom implies he has a much more significant concept in mind than any one distinction can communicate. Seifrid concludes that “Paul’s use of the phrases moves between these limits, generally exhibiting a lack of distinction between the three ideas of locality, instrumentality, and modality . . . As Robertson and others have observed, the instrumental use of the Greek *en* (‘in’) is a metaphorical extension of the local sense.”⁵ This paper seeks to explore the benefits of each of these distinctions.

² Campbell, *Paul and Union with Christ*, 21.

³ Spence, A.J. “Union with Christ,” in *New Dictionary of Theology: Historical and Systematic*, ed. Martin Davie et al., 2nd ed (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2016), 929–32. He describes incarnational union, united by faith, covenantal union, sacramental union, experiential union, and spiritual or mystical union. In consideration of these various understandings he concludes, “our union with Christ has its foundations in the loving purpose of a covenanting God; is established by the saving ministry of his incarnate Son; is entered into through the outward (sacramental) response of an inner trusting faith in the promises of the gospel; sanctifies us by transforming us into the likeness of Jesus as the Spirit baptizes us into his life and privileges; and introduces us to an intimate loving relationship with Christ, and through him to the Father, which we shall experience through time and eternity” (931).

⁴ M. A. Seifrid, “In Christ,” in *Dictionary of Paul and His Letters*, ed. Gerald F. Hawthorne, Ralph P. Martin, and Daniel G. Reid (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 1993), 433.

⁵ Seifrid, “In Christ,” 433.

Union with Christ and Faith (Ephesians 2:1-22)

In Ephesians 2, some form of “in Christ” is used twelve times and alluded to at other times throughout the passage. Here, Paul gives a before and after picture of salvation, both at an individual level (2:1–10) and a corporate level (2:11–22). The distinguishing factor in both comparisons is whether one is united to Christ. This passage demonstrates that believers are united to Christ through faith and given a new identity.

Apart from Christ

Paul begins the chapter by describing the universal plight of humanity apart from Christ. He starts by stating that before salvation, the believers in Ephesus “were dead in their trespasses and sins” (2:1). “Trespasses and sins” are both the cause of them being dead and also the realm in which their death operates or is indicated.

Verse 2 describes how the “Ephesians lived under the influence of powerful forces antithetical to God.”⁶ This verse describes unbelievers as “following the course of this world” and following Satan. Verse 3 adds that, before Christ, individuals followed the “passions of our flesh.” R. Kent Hughes concludes, “The dead, those without Christ, are dominated by the *world*, the *devil*, and the *flesh*. The world dominates from *without*, the flesh from *within*, and the devil from *beyond*.”⁷

In verse 3, Paul speaks of the lifestyle of unbelievers. The “you” plural in verse 1 has led some to conclude that Paul contrasts Gentiles with Jews. Frank Thielman rightly observes, “In Ephesians ethnicity does not enter the argument until 2:11.”⁸ Verse 3 clarifies that this is a universal condition that even includes Jews when he says, “we all

⁶ Lynn H. Cohick, *The Letter to the Ephesians* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2020), 145.

⁷ R. Kent Hughes, *Ephesians: The Mystery of the Body of Christ* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2013), 65.

⁸ Frank Thielman, *Ephesians*, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2010), 125.

once lived.” That the contrast being developed is between believers and unbelievers is further demonstrated by his description of them as “children of wrath” (2:3). It is only unbelievers who can be described in this way.

The second half of the chapter shifts to a corporate or cultural perspective using the category of Gentiles. He specifically calls them “Gentiles in the flesh” (2:11). This is another locative reference. Apart from Christ, all Gentiles dwell in the flesh. Paul may refer back to verse 3, which says, “among whom we all once lived in the passions of our flesh.” He also contrasts the reality of their fleshly identity as Gentiles with their new identity in Christ (2:19). “Separated from” or “without” Christ in verse 12 is contrasted with the verbs of verses 5–6 being accomplished “with Christ.” The message remains the same as that expressed earlier in the chapter; those who are in Christ have been transformed from what they once were into something completely new.

United to Christ

Paul moves from one’s condition apart from Christ to being united to Christ. Lynn H. Cohick says, “Paul’s brief sketch of the human plight sets the stage for his main emphasis, the work of God in Christ for us.”⁹ Verses 1–7 form a single sentence with God as the subject (2:4). Cohick further adds, “Paul spends the first three verses explaining human reality in sin, so as to help the Ephesians better understand the magnitude of God’s actions.”¹⁰ The transition in the first section is highlighted by the phrase “but God” in verse 4. Man’s condition was wretched and hopeless, but God acted according to his character “even when we were dead in our trespasses” (2:5). This is a repetition of the phrase used in verse 1 and is clearly connecting these two verses. The central action in this sentence is “made us alive.” A drastic change from death to life has occurred. It is

⁹ Cohick, *The Letter to the Ephesians*, 141.

¹⁰ Cohick, *The Letter to the Ephesians*, 141.

significant to note the nature of this transformation, “(God) made us alive together with Christ” (2:4). Here, Paul uses “with Christ” to show union with Christ as the instrument of one’s salvation. He summarizes that God is making people alive with Christ as “by grace you have been saved” (2:4). Being united to Christ by grace is synonymous with being saved. Charles Hodge says that the phrase in verse 5, “made us alive together with Christ,” “does not mean merely that we are quickened *as* he was, that there is an analogy between his resurrection from the grave, and our spiritual resurrection; but the truth here taught is that . . . in virtue of the union, covenant and vital, between Christ and his people, his death was their death, his life is their life, and his exaltation is theirs.”¹¹ The connection to salvation is even more apparent in verses 8–9, which begins with a new sentence that provides the summary, “For by grace you have been saved through faith.” Salvation is by grace through faith and is God’s work. This summarizes what Paul has already expressed in the Christian’s union with Christ in verses 4–7. Faith is not a human work; it is a gift from God and is his work. However apart from faith, there is no union with Christ.

The believer’s union with Christ is emphasized in the rapid repetition of “with Christ” in verses 5–6. There are three actions tied to this union: God made the believer alive with Christ (2:5), raised him with Christ (2:6), and seated him with Christ in the heavenly places (2:6). Lest there be any doubt that “with Christ” is speaking of union with Christ, Paul ends verse 6 with “in Christ.” Cohick writes, “These three verbs share the prefix ‘with,’ further emphasizing the connection of believers to Christ.”¹² All these realities happen with Christ because the believer is united to Christ. Ian Hamilton writes, “The union of believers with Christ is so intimate that what happened to Him happened to

¹¹ Charles Hodge, *Commentary on the Epistle to the Ephesians* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1950), 113.

¹² Cohick, *The Letter to the Ephesians*, 151.

them.”¹³ Christ and believers are both raised from the dead (1:19–20; 2:5–6), and both are seated in the heavenly places (1:20; 2:6). This is very similar to the language Paul uses in Colossians 2:12–13, “having been buried with him in baptism, in which you were also raised with him through faith in the powerful working of God, who raised him from the dead. And you, who were dead in your trespasses and the uncircumcision of your flesh, God made alive together with him, having forgiven us all our trespasses.” Andrew T. Lincoln observes, connecting Colossians 2:12–13 in relation to this passage, that “the thought in both instances is that new life comes to believers because they share in what had happened to Christ.”¹⁴ Harold W. Hoehner states, “It is our union with Christ that gives us the right to be in the heavenly places.”¹⁵ Bryan Chapell, speaking of verse 6, affirms, “Here he explicitly states that believers are united with Christ in his resurrection and exaltation in the heavens.”¹⁶ Hodge writes, “It is in virtue of their union with Christ that believers are partakers of his life and exaltation.”¹⁷ This means, “it is our union with Christ that gives us the right to be in the heavenly places.”¹⁸

Verse 10 speaks of this new life in creation language so that Christians are re-created “in Christ.” This is similar to what Paul writes in 2 Corinthians 5:17, “If anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come.” This new life is characterized by walking in good works (2:10), much as life apart from Christ was marked by the passions of the flesh and the desires of the body and mind (2:3).

¹³ Ian Hamilton, *Ephesians*, The Lectio Continua Expository Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage Books, 2017), 71.

¹⁴ Andrew T. Lincoln, *Ephesians*, Word Biblical Commentary. vol 42 (Dallas: World Books, 1990), 101.

¹⁵ Harold W. Hoehner, *Ephesians: An Exegetical Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2002), 335.

¹⁶ Bryan Chapell, *Ephesians* (Phillipsburg, N.J.: P & R Publishing, 2009), 83.

¹⁷ Hodge, *Commentary on the Epistle to the Ephesians*, 115.

¹⁸ Hoehner, *Ephesians*, 335.

Hamilton observes, “Christians no longer belong to this world. Our foundational identity is in Christ.”¹⁹ This new identity shapes how believers live. Chapell concludes, “Life, pardon, divine righteousness, and eternal glory are mine because I am ‘in Christ.’ All of these blessings are the fruit of my union with my Savior.”²⁰

In verse 11, Paul draws some conclusions from what he just said that apply these truths to the church at a corporate level. Gentiles were once “separated from Christ, alienated from the commonwealth of Israel and strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world” (2:12). This former state is contrasted with their present reality: “But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ” (2:13). Hoehner notes that the phrase in verse 13, “but now in Christ Jesus,” “denotes the contrast between their present condition and that prior to conversion.”²¹ “In Christ” is not just a relationship, it also implies location here. They are no longer in the world or far off; believers are in Christ. Though they once were “in the flesh,” they are now “in Christ Jesus” (2:13). What defines their identity is not their ethnicity but their union with Christ. Jew and Gentile distinctions are broken down, and they together become a new man (2:14–15), a new household (2:19), and a new temple (2:21–22). Believers receive all these benefits because they are united to Christ by faith in Christ. Having proven this new identity for those in Christ here, the rest of the book will flesh it out. Cohick explains, “Paul lays this theoretical foundation of believers’ salvation and will provide instructions in the final three chapters that detail how believers live out their new identity as followers of Jesus.”²²

¹⁹ Hamilton, *Ephesians*, 73.

²⁰ Chapell, *Ephesians*, 85.

²¹ Hoehner, *Ephesians*, 361.

²² Cohick, *The Letter to the Ephesians*, 139.

Union with Christ as the Source of All Spiritual Blessings (Ephesians 1:3–10)

In Ephesians 1:3–10, Paul breaks into praise of “the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ” for the spiritual blessings he has given to his people (1:3).²³ He specifically discusses some of these blessings while acknowledging the blessings are further reaching than what is contained. Paul states that believers have been given every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places. Because of Christ, no spiritual blessing is withheld from the Christian. God has blessed his people with these blessings in Christ. Union with Christ is the source of all spiritual blessings the believer will ever enjoy.

The Nature of the Spiritual Blessings

The simplest explanation of the word “spiritual” is that it is used to distinguish from that which is material. God, the creator of all things, is the source of all material and spiritual blessings. Material blessings are enjoyed by believers and unbelievers alike. As Matthew 5:45 affirms, “For he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust.” The spiritual blessings are mitigated through Christ only to those united to Him. Thus, the term distinguishes a unique set of blessings that belong to the Christian through his union with Christ. “Spiritual” here may also pertain to the application of such blessings through the work of the Holy Spirit.

Verse 3 says, “every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places.” It is important to note that the phrase “heavenly places” does not refer to where the blessings will be received or when they will be received. The phrase “heavenly places” does not indicate a future reception after the believer dies. Hodge writes, “The meaning is that these blessings pertain to that heavenly state into which the believer is introduced. Here on

²³ This paper starts with chapter two of Ephesians before looking at chapter one for this reason. Chapter one contains Paul’s expressions of exultation at the blessings of union with Christ which includes aspects of salvation, but he comes back to explain salvation and union in chapter 2. For the flow of the paper, it made sense to begin with the explanation in chapter 2.

earth, he is, as the apostle says in chapter 2:6, ‘in heavenly places.’ He is a citizen of heaven, Phil 3:10.”²⁴ Hoehner says it another way: “The believer, who is united with Christ who is in heaven, partakes of the spiritual benefits from the heavenlies.”²⁵ The blessings flow from the heavenly places where Christ is seated on the throne. Lincoln writes, “In Ephesians, through what God has done in Christ, the benefits of the age to come have become a present heavenly reality for believers.”²⁶ Verse 3 begins with the word “blessed” in the past tense. Hodge notes, “The past tense, *hath blessed*, is used because the apostle contemplates his readers as actually redeemed, and in present possession of the unspeakable blessings which Christ has procured.”²⁷ It would be easy to imagine these spiritual blessings as something to be received in heaven or the new heavens and earth, but they are given now to every believer.

Those spiritual, heavenly blessings which belong to Christ also belong to the believer through his union with Him. Lincoln explains that this is because “believers experience the blessings of the heavenly realms not only through Christ’s agency but also because they are incorporated into the exalted Christ as their representative, who is himself in the heavenly realms.”²⁸ Christians are united to Him who is in heaven and thus really, though not physically, seated in the heavens with Him. Ephesians 1:20 says, “He raised him from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly places.” Ephesians 2:6–7 states that he, “raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus, so that in the coming ages he might show the immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus.”

²⁴ Hodge, *Commentary on the Epistle to the Ephesians*, 31.

²⁵ Hoehner, *Ephesians*, 172.

²⁶ Lincoln, *Ephesians*, 21.

²⁷ Hodge, *Commentary on the Epistle to the Ephesians*, 28.

²⁸ Lincoln, *Ephesians*, 22.

The Extent of the Spiritual Blessings

The extent of these blessings is quite remarkable, as Paul says, “every spiritual blessing” (1:3). There is no blessing that could be had that is withheld from the one who is united to Christ. Paul enumerates a sampling of some of these blessings in verses 4–14. He describes election, sanctification, and holiness in verse 4: “He chose us in him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and blameless before him.” Verse 5 shows that in love, “he predestined us for adoption to himself as sons through Jesus Christ.” Predestination and election speak to his sovereign power to save the sinner and, as is mentioned, make him his holy and blameless child. The sinner, who was once at enmity with God, has now amazingly been made his child. John Murray states, “the fountain of salvation itself in the eternal election of the Father is ‘in Christ.’ . . . the Father elected from eternity, but he elected in Christ. . . . there was no election of the Father in eternity apart from Christ.”²⁹ Jesus is the beloved and he has blessed believers with his “glorious grace” (1:6). In verse 7, Paul says, “In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses.” Redemption and forgiveness belong to the Christian through his union with Christ. God has further “lavished upon us” the “riches of his grace” and made known the “mystery of his will” (1:7–9). The blessings continue in verse 11: “In him we have obtained an inheritance.” The Christian has already obtained an inheritance that will one day be fully realized. Finally, he tops this off in verse 13 with the Holy Spirit: “In him you also, when you heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation, and believed in him, were sealed with the promised Holy Spirit, who is the guarantee of our inheritance until we acquire possession of it, to the praise of his glory.” The believer receives all this through their union with Christ and is given the Spirit of Christ to indwell them. They are in him, and he is in them.

²⁹ John Murray, *Redemption Accomplished and Applied* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1955), 162.

While this list may seem extensive, it is in no way exhaustive. Whatever other spiritual blessing the Christian enjoys or could enjoy is his in Christ. This is further indicated as the passage goes on to say that God has lavished the riches of his grace upon believers (Eph 1:7–8). The “riches of his grace” seems to be another way of speaking of the spiritual blessings that flow from a person’s union or one such blessing that encompasses a range of other blessings. What is remarkable is the language Paul uses of God lavishing the riches of His grace upon those united to Christ. Cohick says, “The point Paul makes is a cosmic one—the blessings are as unlimited as the universe God created. . . . Paul explains that this grace is not parceled out reluctantly or miserly but is poured out with lavish abundance (1:8).”³⁰ This is all an expression of God’s love for his people (1:4). God’s love overflows to the Christian in this abundance of spiritual blessing because they are in the Son.

The Source of the Spiritual Blessings

The believer's source of all these blessings is their union with Christ, who possesses every blessing. Chapell notes, “Twelve times in verses 3–12, Paul refers in various ways to believers’ spiritual union with Christ.”³¹ Union with Christ is not a passing reference but is at the heart of what Paul is communicating and the source of every blessing he describes. In addition to the overarching reference in verse 3, Paul says that “he chose us in him” (4), “he predestined us for adoption to himself as sons through Jesus Christ” (5), “he has blessed us in the Beloved” (6), “we have redemption through his blood” (7), “according to his purpose, which he set forth in Christ” (9), and “to unite all things in him” (10). The believer’s union with Jesus is the source of every blessing he

³⁰ Cohick, *The Letter to the Ephesians*, 90.

³¹ Chapell, *Ephesians*, 19.

enjoys. Hodge explains, “Much in the same sense the Israelites are said to have been chosen in Abraham. Their relation to Abraham and God’s covenant with him, were the ground and reason of all the peculiar blessings they enjoyed. So our covenant union with Christ is the ground of all the benefits which we as the people of God possess or hope for.”³² Romans 8:32 says, “He who did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all, how will he not also with him graciously give us all things?” God, who has already given believers the greater blessing, his Son, will not withhold the lesser blessing, everything else.

These blessings are lavished on the believer in love (4). Given the sinful state of man, this seems to be almost impossible. Further, Chapell says, “God loves us because we are in union with the Son that he loves. United to Christ, we are also adopted by the Father, and as such have all the rights, privileges, and affection that the Son of God himself receives from God.”³³ The love flows to the believer because they are united to the Son, who knows the fullness of the Father’s love. Chapell writes, “God’s love is so expansive for those who are united to Christ that all that is due Christ is granted to us.”³⁴ John Calvin says, “Christ, having been made ours, makes us sharers with him in the gifts with which he has been endowed.”³⁵

As a result of union with Christ, what is said of Christ is now said of his people. These blessings that now belong to the Christian are secure. They are not conditional on the believer at all. Instead, they belong to the believer because he belongs to the Son to whom he has been united. This should be a source of great comfort for the believer. Who

³² Hodge, *Commentary on the Epistle to the Ephesians*, 30.

³³ Chapell, *Ephesians*, 25.

³⁴ Chapell, *Ephesians*, 85.

³⁵ John Calvin, *Institutes of Christian Religion 1536 Edition*, trans. Ford Lewis Battles, Rev. Ed (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1960), 737.

they are as a person and how God views them is determined by how God views Jesus. Their past sin and experiences, as well as current circumstances, cannot remove the blessings given to them. This, of course, does not mean that they will always experience these blessings to the same degree. Hoehner writes, “The reason the believer does not receive spiritual benefits is not because God is in some way stingy and he or she must plead for them, but because believers are not appropriating by faith what God has already bestowed in their behalf. The problem is not with God but with the believer.”³⁶ This points to the believer’s need to abide in Christ and that union for their experience and delight in these blessings and Christ Himself.

Union with Christ is the fountainhead and source of every other spiritual blessing the believer receives. Sinclair Ferguson writes, “The benefits of the gospel are *in Christ*. They do not exist apart from him. They are *ours* only *in him*.”³⁷ These benefits only come through union with Christ, so the focus should be on Christ above the blessings. Hamilton states, “There is always the danger that we seek God’s blessings apart from seeking Christ, in whom all the blessings of God are found.”³⁸ John Calvin says, “We should be satisfied with the benefits of our Lord Jesus Christ, and that when we are grafted into his body and made one with him by belief of the gospel, then we may assure ourselves that he is the fountain which never dries up, nor can ever become exhausted, and that in him we have all variety of good things, and all perfection.”³⁹

³⁶ Hoehner, *Ephesians*, 172.

³⁷ Sinclair Ferguson, *The Whole Christ: Legalism, Antinomianism, and Gospel Assurance—Why the Marrow Controversy Still Matters* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2016), 44.

³⁸ Hamilton, *Ephesians*, 18.

³⁹ John Calvin, *Sermons on Ephesians* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1973), 355.

Union with Christ Produces a New Identity that Is to Be Treasured (Philippians 3:1–11)

Many things compete to define human existence today. Sometimes these realities are negative experiences, accumulated possessions, past, present, or perceived future success. Isaiah 61:10 reveals the object of worship and rejoicing: “I will greatly rejoice in the Lord; my soul shall exult in my God, for he has clothed me with the garments of salvation; he has covered me with the robe of righteousness, as a bridegroom decks himself like a priest with a beautiful headdress, and as a bride adorns herself with her jewels.” Since union with Christ is the source of all the Christian’s spiritual blessings, it should be highly prized and the source of immense joy in the life of the Christian. Paul is an excellent example of this perspective and serves to teach Christians the importance they should place on their union with Christ. An exegesis of Philippians 3:1–11 shows that Paul viewed union with Christ as shaping his identity and something to be greatly treasured.

The passage begins with a command and reminder to “rejoice in the Lord” (3:1), which very much echoes the expression of Isaiah 61:10 above. He will go on to express the foundation and motivation for his rejoicing in the Lord. Before he does so, he warns them in verse 2 to “look out for the dogs, look out for the evildoers, look out for those who mutilate the flesh.” The problem with these individuals is not only their mutilation of the flesh but that they put their confidence in the flesh. Calvin explains Paul’s meaning of flesh here, “For under the term *flesh* he includes everything of an external kind in which an individual is prepared to glory, as will appear from the context, or, to express it in fewer words, he gives the name *flesh* to everything that is apart from Christ.”⁴⁰ By contrast, the true circumcision, true Israel, and true Christians are those

⁴⁰ John Calvin, *Commentaries on the Epistles to the Philippians, Colossians, and Thessalonians*, vol. 21 (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2005), 89.

“who worship by the Spirit of God and glory in Christ Jesus and put no confidence in the flesh” (3:3). The true believers are those who glory in Christ Jesus above all that the world has to offer which might give them “confidence in the flesh” (3:3).

Confidence in the Flesh: Paul’s Former Boast

Paul goes on to show the reasons he has to put confidence in the flesh if he were thinking like these false teachers in the church. In doing so, he recounts his former glory in his life before becoming a Christian. It is essential to understand that Paul is not listing bad things but rather what should be understood as good, especially from the perspective of the false teachers and those who are unbelievers. Many of these things he lists are outstanding achievements that any religious man would be glad to boast in. Mark Keown writes, “Paul effectively states, my claims are as good as they get, but they and all claims are worthless and fruitless for earning status with God, for salvation and inclusion in the people of God. All that matters is knowing and gaining Christ through faith.”⁴¹

Moisés Silva identifies seven clauses in verses 5–6 which “naturally fall into two groups: the first four items describe privileges that Paul acquired simply by virtue of his birth, while the last three focus on voluntary choices of his own.”⁴² J. B. Lightfoot describes the three topics of boasting that were Paul’s personal choice “(1) as regards *law*, he attached himself to the strictest sect which was the strictest in its ritual observance. (2) As regards *zeal*, he had been as energetic as any of his countrymen in persecuting the Church. (3) As regards *righteousness*, he had left nothing undone which the law required.”⁴³ Having recounted these areas of boasting, Paul proceeds in verse 7 to say,

⁴¹ Mark Keown, *Philippians 2:19–4:23: Evangelical Exegetical Commentary*, ed. H. Wayne House (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2017), 136.

⁴² Moisés Silva, *Philippians*, 2nd ed (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2005), 150.

⁴³ J. B. Lightfoot, *Saint Paul’s Epistle to the Philippians*, Revised ed, Classic Commentary Library (London: MacMillan, 1913), 147. Emphasis original.

“But whatever gain I had, I counted as loss for the sake of Christ.” Though these are not inherently bad, if they interfere with one coming to Christ, they are bad.⁴⁴ If good works in any way become a ground for self-righteousness, then they can hinder one from faith in Christ and dependence on his righteousness. Therefore, even good religious things can be counted as a “loss for the sake of Christ.” In verse 8, Paul goes even further: “Indeed, I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things and count them as rubbish.” Ralph P. Martin, speaking of verse 8, writes, “Paul’s range of thought is extended now to include not only the religious advantages of the earlier verses, but *everything* which might conceivably be reckoned as meritorious and claimed as acceptable to God by the ‘religious’ person.”⁴⁵ There is nothing “religious” that can be done by Paul or anyone else that compares to knowing Christ. None of those things can save the sinner or impart the blessings that the Christian receives through Christ.

The Superiority of Union with Christ

It is specifically union with Christ that Paul sees, in contrast to these other religious acts, as the far superior blessing. In verses 7 and 8, he speaks of counting his prior gain as loss “for the sake of Christ” and “because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord.” At the end of verse 8 and into verse 9, he says, “In order that I may gain Christ and be found in him.” Paul’s chief delight and glory is gaining Christ, which is directly connected with being found in him. Gerald F. Hawthorne and Ralph P. Martin write, “Paul states his motives for counting everything as loss (vv8c–

⁴⁴ The one that stands out as inherently bad is his statement “as to zeal, a persecutor of the church.” At the time he believed the church to be in opposition to God, which is why he cites this as an example of religious zeal or zeal for God. If one were to think of this from a Christian perspective as opposition to false religion driven by a zeal for Christ, it might be closer to the positive aspect Paul is communicating.

⁴⁵ Ralph P. Martin, *Philippians* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008), 148–49.

10). They are (1) that he might gain Christ, (2) that he might be found in Christ, and (3) that he might know Christ and the power of his resurrection.”⁴⁶

There are two particular phrases at the end of verse 8 and the beginning of verse 9: “gain Christ” and “be found in him.” George Hunsinger says, “To gain Christ (3:8), to be found in him (3:9), and to know him (3:10) are three ways of indicating the same thing. They are diverse aspects of a single gift.”⁴⁷ Keown agrees, “‘And being found in him’ is effectively continuous and parallel to the previous ‘that I might gain Christ.’”⁴⁸ People do not usually think of gaining another person, so that phrase can be challenging to comprehend. Martin explains the basic meaning, “To gain him is to have him as one’s all-prevailing merit.”⁴⁹ The concept of gaining Christ, Hawthorne and Martin further explain, “must also have embraced the idea of communion with Christ in an ever-deepening relationship that will continue until it reaches its consummation at the Parousia.”⁵⁰ While “gaining Christ” is not synonymous with being united to Christ, it implies union and participation in him. “Communion with Christ in an ever-deepening relationship” is the basic concept of abiding seen below in John 15.

Being found in Christ means to remove all pretense of self-reliance and to receive from the judge not what one has earned, but what has been given to Christ and is rightly his. Hawthorne and Martin show that to be “in Christ” in verse 9 for Paul means “to stand before the Judge, not presenting himself and his claims to God’s favor, but because he is in Christ, presenting Christ and the all-prevailing merits of Christ.”⁵¹ Being

⁴⁶ Gerald F. Hawthorne and Ralph P. Martin, *Philippians*, vol. 43, Word Biblical Commentary (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2004), 193.

⁴⁷ George Hunsinger, *Philippians*, Brazos Theological Commentary on the Bible (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2020), 99.

⁴⁸ Keown, *Philippians 2*, 148.

⁴⁹ Martin, *Philippians*, 151.

⁵⁰ Hawthorne and Martin, *Philippians*, 193.

⁵¹ Hawthorne and Martin, *Philippians*, 194.

found in him also seems to imply that God the Father finds Paul in Christ on the day of judgment. Verse 9 goes on to say, “found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God that depends on faith.” Paul ties this to the resurrection in verse 10. Union with Christ means that the righteousness of Christ is credited to the believer so that God the Father sees the believer as righteous, just as Jesus is righteous.

In verses 10–11, Paul carries the implications of union with Christ much farther than simply the imputation and participation in the righteousness of Christ. He says, “That I may know him and the power of his resurrection, and may share his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, that by any means possible I may attain the resurrection from the dead.” Knowing him seems to be another expression of union with Christ. What is remarkable is that Paul speaks in various ways of participation in Jesus’s sufferings, death, and resurrection. Concerning this, Ben Witherington writes,

It is probably a mistake to underestimate Paul’s language about union with Christ and being “in Christ.” This suggests something intimate, whether we want to call it mystical union or not, and Paul is prepared to press the language so far that he actually talks about participating in, even filling up the sufferings of Christ, sharing a death like his and being raised by the power of his resurrection.⁵²

Colossians 1:24 reads, “Now I rejoice in my sufferings for your sake, and in my flesh I am filling up what is lacking in Christ’s afflictions for the sake of his body, that is, the church.” Nothing is lacking in Christ’s afflictions apart from a visual demonstration of that suffering to those who did not witness it. Paul is providing that to those to whom he ministers as he undergoes suffering for the sake of Christ. This concept is coupled with boasting in Paul’s writing. In 1 Corinthians 1:31, Paul, quoting Jeremiah 9:23–24, writes, “Let the one who boasts, boast in the Lord.” In a similar passage in 2 Corinthians 11,

⁵² Ben Witherington III, *Paul’s Letter to the Philippians: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2011), 203.

Paul shows in a self-proclaimed foolish way that he can match boasts with others if that is his method, but it is not. Instead, he says, “If I must boast, I will boast of the things that show my weakness” (2 Cor 11:30). He is not concerned with all the temporal accomplishments that so many other people see as defining their identity and being the foundation of their boasting. Paul prefers instead to boast about his weakness which is an odd thing to boast in. He said earlier in the same letter, “But we have this treasure in jars of clay, to show that the surpassing power belongs to God and not to us” (2 Cor 4:7). In 2 Corinthians 12:9, Paul explains that the Lord said to him, “My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.”

Union with Christ has changed Paul’s values and his very identity. What others view as shameful, and is unquestionably suffering, becomes a ground for boasting. This is not because it is good in itself. Instead, it is good because it maximizes Paul’s dependence on Christ through that union and makes Jesus’ strength and power manifest to Paul and to others who see Paul. It causes Paul to look for his identity not in himself but in his union with his Savior. Dennis E. Johnson explains, “The treasure worth more than everything to Paul is *Christ himself*-to gain *him*, to be found in *him*, to know *him*. In Christ Paul has received the robe of righteousness that his best efforts could never have pieced together; but he had received, was receiving, and would receive so much more.”⁵³ Johnson applies these truths so well when he writes:

When you find yourself glorying in anything other than Christ Jesus, you need to return to the gracious gospel that drew you to your Savior at the beginning. You need to see that Christ, and Christ alone, deserves your full confidence, for Christ alone conveys “the righteousness from God” (Phil. 3:9) that silences Satan’s charges and your own conscience’s guilty discomfort.⁵⁴

Though Paul’s prior achievements could provide solid ground for religious

⁵³ Dennis E. Johnson, *Philippians* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P & R Publishing, 2013), 198. Emphasis original.

⁵⁴ Johnson, *Philippians*, 192.

boasting, Paul's values have changed. His boast is now in Christ and him alone. Nothing else in this world can compare to being found in Christ. Keown observes, "Paul rejects any theological construct that involves Jesus plus *anything*."⁵⁵ This is an application of Jesus' teaching in Mark 8:35–37: "For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake and the gospel's will save it. For what does it profit a man to gain the whole world and forfeit his soul? For what can a man give in return for his soul?" Nothing that anyone, not even Paul, can accomplish or possess will compare to union with Christ. Paul will therefore encourage the Corinthian church by saying, "We look not to the things that are seen but to the things that are unseen. For the things that are seen are transient, but the things that are unseen are eternal" (2 Cor 4:18). Union with Christ is of a more significant and eternally lasting value compared to anything else. The righteousness from God that will result in the resurrection is only found in union with him.

Abiding in Union (John 15:1–11)

An exegesis of John 15:1-11 shows that Jesus commands believers to abide in Him. The word "abide" appears ten times in these eleven verses and "indwelling/abiding" occurs 24 times in John 13–17.⁵⁶ In 15:4, Jesus gives the imperative command for the Christian to "abide in me." Abiding in Jesus is further clarified by the subsequent commands to abide or remain in the words of Jesus (7), remain in his love (9–10), and keeping his commandments (10).

The mention of a vine must be understood as referring to Israel, who was frequently spoken of as a vine in the Old Testament (cf. Hos 10:1–2; Isa 5:1–7; 27:2–6;

⁵⁵ Keown, *Philippians 2*, 136.

⁵⁶ Bennema, "'Union with Christ' in the Johannine Writings," 23.

Jer 2:21; Ezek 15:1–5; 17:1–21; 19:10–15; Ps 80:8–19). Interestingly, those Old Testament occurrences are always negative. George R. Beasley-Murray notes, “In every instance when Israel in its historical life is depicted in the OT as a vine or vineyard, the nation is set under the judgment of God for its corruption, sometimes explicitly for its failure to produce good fruit (e.g., Isa 5:1–7; Jer. 2:21).”⁵⁷ Richard D. Phillips clarifies, “It was in comparison to Israel’s failure that Jesus declared himself the ‘true vine’”⁵⁸ Here Jesus is presenting himself as the true vine and the fulfillment of Israel. He is successful precisely where Old Testament Israel failed. His disciples are branches who become participants in the new Israel through their union with him, which is expressed in the terminology of abiding in this passage. Beasley-Murray writes, “That the vine is *Jesus*, not the Church, is intentional; the Lord is viewed in his representative capacity, the Son of God-Son of Man, who dies and rises that in union with him a renewed people of God might come into being and bring forth fruit for God.”⁵⁹

Jesus is explicitly commanding his followers to have union with Him by abiding or remaining in Him. The exact meaning of abiding/remaining can be difficult to comprehend from the passage. Grant Macaskill notes that Jesus’ use of the image of the vine is “in the context of his fellowship with his disciples, its significance in denoting interpersonal communion (rather than some kind of absorption into the divine) is clear.”⁶⁰ Union with Christ and abiding with him does not mean the Christian becomes divine in any way. Leon Morris observes, “The passage is the Johannine counterpart of the Pauline view of the church as the body of Christ and of believers as ‘in’ Christ.”⁶¹ While John

⁵⁷ George R. Beasley-Murray, *John*, Word Biblical Commentary, vol. 36, 2nd ed. (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1999), 272.

⁵⁸ Richard D. Phillips, *John*, 2nd ed, vol. 2 (Phillipsburg, N.J: P & R Publishing, 2014), 282.

⁵⁹ Beasley-Murray, *John*, 272. Emphasis original.

⁶⁰ Grant Macaskill, *Union with Christ in the New Testament* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), 262.

⁶¹ Leon Morris, *The Gospel According to John*, The New International Commentary on the

does not use the formula “in Christ” as Paul does, he intends “abide in me” to carry the same meaning. Every believer is united to Christ in salvation. Jesus’ command for his believers to abide in Him must mean that they believe in Him, but it is more than simple belief. Speaking of Jesus’ command to “abide in me” in verse 4, Beasley-Murray says, “To ‘remain’ in Jesus has a deeper significance than simply to continue to believe in him, although it includes that; it connotes continuing to live in association or in union with him. *Meivate* (aorist tense), could signify ‘step into union with me.’”⁶² He adds, “To ‘remain’ in Jesus is also to remain in his *love*, just as Jesus throughout his life remained in the Father’s love.”⁶³ Abiding in Jesus is living out of the union in a spiritually productive way. In other words, “There must be an ongoing lifegiving mutuality generated by the disciples’ union with Jesus and Jesus’ union with them.”⁶⁴ The disciple is to understand his union with Christ as the source of spiritual life. Robert A. Peterson speaks of it in these terms: “To abide in Christ is to ‘be’ in him, but it is more—it is to love him. Likewise, for him to abide in us is for him to continue to love us. Abiding is a covenantal concept that speaks of the Son’s continuing to love his people and their continuing to love him.”⁶⁵ Abiding is a covenantal love relationship that is the source of life and fruit in the Christian. The believer is called to live his life depending on that union daily to bear spiritual fruit.

Fruitless Branches

In this metaphor, Jesus speaks of two types of branches: those that bear fruit

New Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), 593.

⁶² Beasley-Murray, *John*, 272.

⁶³ Beasley-Murray, 272. Emphasis original.

⁶⁴ Francis J. Moloney, *Sacra Pagina: The Gospel of John*, vol. 4 (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1998), 420.

⁶⁵ Robert A Peterson, “Union with Christ in the Gospel of John,” *Presbyterion* 39, no. 1 (2013): 24.

and those that do not. The fruitless branches are removed from the vine, thrown away, and ultimately thrown into the fire. Their previous attachment to the vine is not intended to show that they were united to Christ. That would be carrying the metaphor too far and in an unintended direction. Jesus is speaking of unbelievers when he refers to “every branch in me that does not bear fruit” (15:2). John is clear elsewhere that Christians cannot be separated from Christ or lose their salvation. For example, 1 John 2:19 reads, “They went out from us, but they were not of us; for if they had been of us, they would have continued with us. But they went out, that it might become plain that they all are not of us,” and John 10:28–29, “I give them eternal life, and they will never perish, and no one will snatch them out of my hand. My Father, who has given them to me, is greater than all, and no one is able to snatch them out of the Father's hand.” Peterson observes, “Throughout Scripture, although God's people exhibit degrees of fruitfulness (cf. Matt 13:23), to *be fruitless* indicates an absence of divine life (cf. Matt. 7:16–19). Fruitlessness is indicative of a false profession of faith. Persons partaking of divine life produce fruit.”⁶⁶ The reality that Jesus is speaking of unbelievers here is further demonstrated by the context found in verse 8: “By this my Father is glorified, that you bear much fruit and so prove to be my disciples.” Peterson further says, “Fruit-bearing is proof of discipleship, and lack of fruit betrays that one never really was connected to the vine in a life-giving way.”⁶⁷ The reason these branches bear no fruit is seen in verse 5: “Whoever abides in me and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit, for apart from me you can do nothing.” These fruitless branches are apart from Christ. They do not have union with Him and are thus incapable of bearing fruit for the kingdom.

⁶⁶ Peterson, “Union with Christ in the Gospel of John,” 23. Emphasis original.

⁶⁷ Peterson, “Union with Christ in the Gospel of John,” 29.

Fruitful Branches

This passage also speaks of the branches that bear fruit or the fruitful branches. Verse 5 again makes the clarifying distinction of what causes some to bear much fruit and others none: “Whoever abides in me and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit.” The distinguishing factor is union with Christ and specifically abiding in that union. Cornelis Bennema writes, “Disciples cannot bear fruit unless they abide in Jesus. Union with Jesus, then, is not an option but an absolute necessity, and the bearing of fruit is the inevitable outcome or demonstration of this union.”⁶⁸ Morris adds, “Every fruitful branch has vital connection to the vine. So to abide in Christ is the necessary prerequisite of fruitfulness for the Christian.”⁶⁹ Fruitfulness in the Christian life is dependent on union with Christ. This means that it is God who gets the glory for the fruit, and it is no ground for boasting in the life of the Christian. Morris writes, “The allegory of the vine brings before us the importance of fruitfulness in the Christian life and the truth that this is the result, not of human achievement, but of abiding in Christ.”⁷⁰

Israel, as God’s vine, failed to be fruitful. Jesus was successful precisely where Israel failed. He obeyed the Father and is the true fruitful vine. Now, the Christian can share in the fruitfulness of Christ through union with Him and can himself bear fruit through Christ as he abides in that relationship. That relationship to Christ is of the utmost importance for the Christian. Abiding presumes an ongoing reality, not a simple one-time occurrence, as does bearing fruit. Christians who have been united to Christ in salvation are to nurture that relationship and live out of it so that they may bear much fruit for the kingdom. Andreas J. Köstenberger writes, “John emphasizes that Jesus is not merely the person in whom the faith of his followers is rooted but that he should also be

⁶⁸ Bennema, “‘Union with Christ’ in the Johannine Writings,” 29.

⁶⁹ Morris, *The Gospel According to John*, 595.

⁷⁰ Morris, *The Gospel According to John*, 593.

the continuing source of nurture and strength in the life of individual believers and the community.”⁷¹

Verses 9–10 help to clarify the meaning of abiding in Christ by speaking of abiding in Christ’s love: “As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you. Abide in my love. If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love, just as I have kept my Father’s commandments and abide in his love.” Morris says, “He commands them to continue in his love. It is possible for people to live without being mindful of Christ’s love for them and so break the closeness of the fellowship. Jesus commands them not to do this.”⁷² Christians are called to live their lives always mindful of the love of Christ for them. They are to live out of that love. One expression of that is keeping Jesus’ commandments. Christians who abide in his love understand that His commandments are given in love for their good, and their obedience is an expression of their love for Him. While it is beyond the scope of this paper, Jesus goes on in verse 12 and following to extend this further to loving others as he has loved them.

Abiding in Christ and his love produces joy in the believer, as shown in verse 11: “These things I have spoken to you, that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be full.” Murray writes, “Apart from union with Christ we cannot view past, present, or future with anything but dismay and Christless dread. By union with Christ the whole complexion of time and eternity is changed and the people of God may rejoice with joy unspeakable and full of glory.”⁷³ One reason for this joy is that the believer united to Christ is a sharer in and recipient of the Father’s love for the Son. Herman Ridderbos writes, “To remain in Jesus’ love is at the same time to share in his joy, a joy Jesus finds

⁷¹ Andreas J. Köstenberger, *A Theology of John’s Gospel and Letters: The Word, the Christ, the Son of God* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Academic, 2009), 503.

⁷² Morris, *The Gospel According to John*, 597.

⁷³ Murray, *Redemption Accomplished and Applied*, 165.

in being loved and sent by the Father and in carrying out the Father's commandments."⁷⁴ The believer's union with Christ answers the human search for joy. It is experienced to greater and lesser degrees in this life, at least somewhat dependent on the believer's extent of abiding in Christ. One day, that joy will be complete, when Christ returns and believers dwell with Him forever. Psalm 16:11 reads, "In your presence there is fullness of joy; at your right hand are pleasures forevermore." Jesus states that the truest and really the only experience of this reality is through union with Him and abiding in that union. Through union and abiding, Christ is present with the believer, and the believer knows joy and pleasure now and always.

Conclusion

In conclusion, careful exegesis of Ephesians 2:1–21, Ephesians 1:3–10, Philippians 3:1–11, and John 15:1–11 demonstrates that the Christian's union with Christ defines his identity and is the source of all spiritual blessings which he enjoys. John Murray has said, "Union with Christ is really the central truth of the whole doctrine of salvation not only in its application but also in its once-for-all accomplishment in the finished work of Christ."⁷⁵ Christians need to fully grasp the benefits and blessings of their union with Christ as they face the continual pressure to define their identity by various measures.

⁷⁴ Herman Ridderbos, *The Gospel of John: A Theological Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), 519.

⁷⁵ Murray, *Redemption Accomplished and Applied*, 161.

CHAPTER 3
THEORETICAL AND PRACTICAL ISSUES FOR
FINDING THE BELIEVERS' IDENTITY IN
HIS UNION WITH CHRIST

A proper understanding of identity will help show the significance of union with Christ in shaping Christian identity. To develop a proper understanding of identity, I will begin by defining the basic idea of identity. Doing so will provide a helpful way to discuss how American culture commonly misunderstands identity. I will examine how identity is formed through experience and then through feelings. Finally, I will consider how the doctrine of union with Christ can offer a corrective to these and helps to shape a Christian identity in Christ. This will establish the necessity of union with Christ in understanding identity.

Defining Identity

It is essential at the outset to define the terms. What is identity, and what makes Christian identity distinct from a general conception of identity? Identity involves “what it is to be a human agent, a person, a self.”¹ Cornelius Bennema says, “Identity has to do with who one is – a notion of self (personhood), or the set of qualities, values, characteristics and behaviour that distinguishes a person from others.”² Understanding the concept of the “self” is essential in understanding identity's meaning and how it is used in this paper. Psychology professors and experts on the self, Mark L. Leary and June

¹ Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989), 3.

² Bennema, “‘Union with Christ’ in the Johannine Writings,” 34.

Price Tangney, “have identified five distinct ways in which behavioral and social scientists commonly use the word ‘self’ and its compounds.”³ First, “self” is a synonym for the total person, primarily physical rather than psychological. Examples of this include references to “self-mutilation” or “self-care” as part of a beauty routine. The second use of “self” concerns the dynamics of personality or “the totality of aspects of a person that make him or her psychologically unique.”⁴ An individual’s personality has implications for understanding and defining identity, yet this does not get to the core of the definition of identity for this paper. The third use of “self” refers to “the inner psychological entity that is the center or subject of a person’s experience.”⁵ This is the conscious entity inside of a person that experiences things. A fourth usage “regards the self as a decision maker and doer, as the agentic ‘ghost in the machine’ that regulates people’s behavior.”⁶ Finally, “self” refers to “people’s perceptions of and beliefs about themselves.”⁷ Leary and Tangney distinguish that the “person’s knowledge or beliefs about him- or herself” are not the “self” per se.⁸ There is more to one’s “self” than just what is perceived or believed to be true. While this perspective is not the complete “self,” it is this use of the word that gets closest to the meaning of “self” in this paper concerning identity.

Leary and Tangney discount the uses of “self” as “person” and “personality” and combine the remaining three to form a single definition: “the human capacity for

³ Mark R. Leary and June Price Tangney, “The Self as an Organizing Construct in the Behavioral and Social Sciences,” in *Handbook of Self and Identity* (New York: Guilford Press, 2003), 6.

⁴ Leary and Tangney, “The Self as an Organizing Concept,” 7.

⁵ Leary and Tangney, “The Self as an Organizing Concept,” 7.

⁶ Leary and Tangney, “The Self as an Organizing Concept,” 7. I have reversed the original order here to highlight the final usage in defining identity for this paper.

⁷ Leary and Tangney, “The Self as an Organizing Concept,” 7.

⁸ Leary and Tangney, “The Self as an Organizing Concept,” 7.

reflexive thinking—the ability to take oneself as the object of one’s attention and thought . . . reflexive consciousness.”⁹ Leary and Tangney have acknowledged that “reflexive consciousness may be the most important psychological concept that distinguishes human beings from most, if not all, other animals.”¹⁰

While Leary and Tangney approach “self” from a secular psychology perspective, their definition of “self,” unintentionally, is not far from a biblical understanding of what it means to be made in the image of God. Humans, as creatures made in God’s image, have the capacity to think about themselves and have a “reflexive consciousness.” One’s identity is the outworking of this “self” reflection. Samuel Jayakumar says something similar, “Identity from the psychological perspective relates to . . . how an individual views him or herself both as a person and in relation to other people. Thus, from the perspective of psychology, ‘identity’ refers to the capacity for self-reflection and the awareness of self.”¹¹ The psychological perspective alone does not go far enough in explaining the “self.” Identity is more than mere self-reflection. It also addresses more profound existential questions of a person's perception of his purpose and how he answers questions, like: “What am I here for?” Seminary professor Carl Trueman explains from a Christian worldview that identity involves “an understanding of what the purpose of my life is, of what constitutes the good life, of how I understand myself—*my self*—in relation to others and to the world around me.”¹² Adding this biblical perspective helps to expand the meaning of identity.

Combining the ideas expressed so far produces a preliminary definition of

⁹ Leary and Tangney, “The Self as an Organizing Concept,” 8.

¹⁰ Leary and Tangney, “The Self as an Organizing Concept,” 4.

¹¹ Samuel Jayakumar, “Towards a Theology of Human Identity: Competing Identities: Imagining and Inventing New Identities,” *Evangelical Review of Theology* 40, no. 3 (July 1, 2016): 234.

¹² Carl R. Trueman, *The Rise and Triumph of the Modern Self: Cultural Amnesia, Expressive Individualism, and the Road to Sexual Revolution* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2020), 22.

identity as people's reflexive understanding of who they are, how they relate to the world around them, and their purpose for existing. This meaning of identity, while helpful, is not without its weaknesses. Two observations arise from such a definition: it is subjective and may be incongruent with reality. Examining these weaknesses will show the need to understand union with Christ in developing a Christian identity.

Identity is developed through interaction with the community and culture to which one belongs and is thus subjective. Charles Taylor writes of the influence of what he calls "social imaginary" on one's understanding of their identity. Social imaginary is "the way ordinary people 'imagine' their social surroundings . . . that common understanding which makes possible common practices, and a widely shared sense of legitimacy."¹³ The subjectivity of such an identity is seen in the constant flux in social surroundings and one's perception of those surroundings. It is essential to understand that social imaginary can be wrong due either to flaws in an individual's "imagining" of their social surroundings or because of their proper imagining of improper social surroundings.

This leads to the second observation that one's identity, as defined above, may be incongruent with reality. A person may identify, contrary to their social surroundings, as an animal, say, a goat or a dog.¹⁴ Their understanding of their "self" to be an animal does not make it a reality. More commonly, in society, it is a man identifying as a woman or a woman identifying as a man. In these instances, their identity is inconsistent with reality. People may also be a part of a community that holds a view of reality that is not true. While they may perfectly conform to their social surroundings, their identity may

¹³ Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2018), 2.

¹⁴ Thomas Thwaites, *GoatMan: How I Took a Holiday from Being Human*, Illustrated ed. (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 2016); Larry Gelten, "Why This Man Decided to Become a Goat," *New York Post*, May 22, 2016, <https://nypost.com/2016/05/22/why-this-man-decided-to-become-a-goat/>; Charlie Moore, "The Transgender Man Who Identifies as a Dog," *Daily Mail Online*, October 12, 2018, <https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-6269051/My-partner-dog-transgender-man-identifies-canine.html>.

still be skewed from reality. Belonging to a transgender community does not make biological gender fluid. Social consensus does not define reality. These examples are more extreme, but most people live with many inconsistencies between their identity and reality. Some of these will be addressed in the next section.

Due to the two stated weaknesses, I need to distinguish and define something deeper and more objective, a Christian identity. Christian identity is an absolute, objective reality defining one's existence and purpose; it is whom God says a person is, even when this may seem incongruous with one's self-identity. Ideally, a person's self-identity and Christian identity would be identical, but this is often not the case. Before considering Christian identity in more detail, it will be helpful to consider further how people develop their identity.

Identity through Experience

In seeking to establish an identity or understand one's identity, there are innumerable ways to get it wrong. Powlison says, "Wrong ways of defining who we are arise naturally in our hearts, and the world around us preaches and models innumerable false identities."¹⁵ To some extent, everyone views their identity through what they do or the things they have done. People understand and interpret their identity through their experiences. In most situations, these are actual experiences or accomplishments that have shaped who people are, how they view themselves, and how they relate to others. While many of these influences on identity are not wrong, they have inherent weaknesses and become faulty when given ultimate prominence. In considering what people do and what is done to them as a means of understanding identity, I will show that they ultimately lack what is needed to truly understand identity.

¹⁵ David Powlison, "A Man's Identity," *The Journal of Biblical Counseling* 34, no. 1 (2020): 78.

Identity Shaped by What a Person Does

How do individuals answer the question of who they are? When strangers meet, they often introduce themselves by name, business, position, and city or location. These answers give the other person an introductory understanding of who they are. Many believe their identity is synonymous with their title or job description. They are a list of positions and accomplishments. Such positions and achievements are regularly changing. If identity is wrapped up in position, then identity must necessarily change when the position changes. A person may have worked hard and spent most of his working life climbing the corporate ladder to one day become the company's CEO. This identity may be wrapped up in that title, but what happens when one retires and becomes the former CEO? Many people struggle with such a change in identity. This is more evident when the business closes or downsizes, and the person loses his position. If their identity is tied to their position, then a loss of position can mean a loss of that identity. This exposes one of the most significant weaknesses of a person seeking his identity in the things he does. These things are temporary, constantly changing, and have little lasting value in shaping one's identity. Everyone's life will one day end, and how important will the things they do now be in shaping their eternal identity?

One's spiritual endeavors and actions can shape how one defines his identity. One may view himself as a godly person based on what he does and not necessarily on God. People may spend an hour each day reading the Bible and praying. Maybe they have perfect church attendance and always know the answers in Sunday school. They have the proper understanding of theology and belong to the denomination that is correct in its theology. If their understanding of their godly identity is based on what they do, what happens when they fail in one of these things? What if they fail to get a full hour in one day or do not read the Bible at all that day? What happens when they sin in some grievous and perhaps public way? What if someone else knows more answers in class, or

their theological views change, and they realize they were not in the correct denomination? Further, while some of these disciplines are good, they do not determine how God views or understands a man to be godly.

The experiences that people view as shaping their identity are vast and varied.

Powlison gives some further examples:

You might identify yourself by your lineage or ethnicity, by your job history or the schools you attended, by your marital status or parental role. Perhaps you define who you are by your political leanings or the objects of your sexual longings. Maybe you consider yourself to be summed up in a Meyers-Briggs category or a psychiatric diagnosis. Your sense of self might be based on money (or lack of), on achievements (or failures) . . . on your self-esteem (or self-hatred). Perhaps you think that your sins define you: an angry man, an addict, an anxious people-pleaser.¹⁶

Unquestionably, all these things affect how people understand their identity. Considering the various ways a people understand their identity, apart from union with Christ, this is the healthiest way. It is good for parents to see themselves as parents and seek to care for, love, and nourish their children. At the same time, it is necessary to understand the inherent weakness of defining oneself only in terms of the things one does. Many things a person does are temporary and fleeting, and none offer an unchanging and ultimate understanding of who the person is. There is, however, a better foundation upon which to define identity.

Identity Shaped by What Is Done to a Person

A second way people define their identity through experiences is by the things done to them. This shares the same weaknesses as all experiential understandings of identity. What one experiences is temporary and fleeting. This has the added disadvantage of being further removed from a true identity. While the experiences may be true, people can still develop a false understanding of their identity based on actual

¹⁶ Powlison, "A Man's Identity," 78.

objective experiences.

One of the clearest examples of things done to individuals affecting their identity is that of abuse. People who have suffered abuse often wrongly assume they are worthless because of what they have experienced. Many people have been sinned against in grievous ways, leaving them ashamed and believing something is wrong with them. Edward T. Welch, Psychologist and faculty with Christian Counseling and Educational Foundation (CCEF), defines shame as “the deep sense that you are unacceptable because of something you did, something done to you, or something associated with you. You feel exposed and humiliated.”¹⁷ Many people have been left feeling worthless or a failure because of ways they have been sinned against. Some have endured years of verbal abuse. If someone tells another person that he is disgusting and unclean for long enough, they he begins to believe the lie. Those descriptions become a part of who they are and how they define their identity. Someone telling a person he is worthless, disgusting, or unclean in no way makes these things true. This is an example of one way that what is done to a person is one step further away from who he is than the things he does.

In some cultures, names contribute to defining identity. Speaking of the Hebrews in the Bible, Jayakumar points out, “one's name was supposed to reveal one's personal character When parents give a child a name, they are also making a confession about their hope for who their child will become. In this way, the name carries with it some identity for the child.”¹⁸ In American culture, someone's first name rarely carries any meaning. A surname may indicate a person's ethnicity or national heritage, and that connection to ethnicity shapes his perception of identity. Nicknames are sometimes the closest American culture gets to linking a name to identity. Positively or

¹⁷ Edward T. Welch, *Shame Interrupted: How God Lifts the Pain of Worthlessness and Rejection* (Greensboro, NC: New Growth Press, 2012), 2.

¹⁸ Jayakumar, “Towards a Theology of Human Identity,” 233.

negatively, people may view themselves through the name others call them.

People can view themselves through the afflictions that they have suffered in their life. Perhaps they grew up in abject poverty and perceived or real disadvantage. Disabilities can shape identity, whether from birth or through an injury. Children who live through their parent's divorce or witness domestic abuse can view themselves through these experiences. Some divorced people view themselves in light of the marriage's failure or the ex-spouse's mistreatment. Those who survive cancer see themselves as a cancer survivor; They may wear the t-shirt and have the sticker on their car. They may have lost a loved one, which shaped how they viewed themselves as survivors differently. These afflictions affect one's understanding of value and self-worth in shaping one's identity.

There is also cultural identity when a group shares an identity through common experiences or interests. One may be a part of a gang, a country club, a particular ethnicity, a knitting group, a bowling league, the LGBTQ+ community, or a political party. Groups like this influence how people in them view themselves. Positively, a cultural identity makes people feel like they belong and can provide a sense of security. Negatively, it may reflect seeking identity through the approval of others, and the interests and beliefs of the group may be incongruent with personal opinions.

All experiences, including the things done to individuals by others, profoundly impact how they view themselves. Defining themselves by what is done to them is an expression of living out of the approval or rejection of others. Yet, Jonathan Landry Cruse rightly notes in his book on identity and union with Christ that, "These are things that are not wrong in and of themselves but when given such ultimate prominence in our lives, the result has been disastrous."¹⁹ A person looking at his experiences is looking at things

¹⁹ Jonathan Landry Cruse, *The Christian's True Identity: What It Means to Be in Christ* (Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage Books, 2019), 5.

horizontally, things in creation to give him his identity. People need something more concrete, objective, and lasting to define who they are.

Identity through Feelings

Recently, there has been a shift away from determining identity by external realities and experiences. Today, the understanding of selfhood primarily focuses on the individual's inner life. External realities have been replaced with internal feelings and beliefs. Trueman says that society has witnessed “a prioritization of the individual's inner psychology—we might even say ‘feelings’ or ‘intuitions—for our sense of who we are and what the purpose of our lives is.”²⁰ This means that identity is now invented rather than discovered. The reality one creates for oneself may be incongruent with reality and truth. What one believes or feels has become more real, authentic, genuine, or valid than reality and truth itself. Though external realities which shape identity sometimes shift, such as a career change, they are generally fixed and determined by reality. This modern shift has made one's identity fluid and variable depending on what one feels or believes at any given time. This understanding represents a further step away from a proper sense of identity than the abovementioned experiences. The modern shift in understanding identity through feelings is harmful and detrimental to developing a true Christian identity as it is a movement away from external truth and reality itself.

An Internal and Relative Shift

There was a time when a person's community, culture, and the world around him largely determined his identity as he conformed to these entities and their purposes. In recent decades there has been a shift away from these external influences toward a

²⁰ Trueman, *The Rise and Triumph of the Modern Self*, 23.

pursuit of finding identity through internal and personal psychological happiness.

Trueman explains that previous generations

found their purpose and well-being by being committed to something outside of themselves. In the world of psychological man, however, the commitment is first and foremost to the self and is inwardly directed. Thus, the order is reversed. Outward institutions become in effect the servants of the individual and her sense of well-being.²¹

This shift is apparent in American educational institutions, which once taught students greater realities to be understood and affirmed. Now, educational institutions seek to depose the very idea that there is a greater reality to which all must answer.²²

Taylor explains the modern shift in understanding identity in terms of the relationship between two different ways of thinking about the world, which he calls *mimesis* and *poiesis*. Trueman summarizes,

A mimetic view regards the world as having a given order and a given meaning and thus sees human beings as required to discover that meaning and conform themselves to it. Poiesis, by way of contrast, sees the world as so much raw material out of which meaning and purpose can be created by the individual.²³

The shift in understanding identity is tied to a more profound change in how people understand reality. It reflects a secular culture's rejection of God and absolute truth. Trueman writes, "As society moves from a view of the world as possessing intrinsic meaning, so it also moves away from a view of humanity as having a specific end."²⁴ God and His Word should stand as the foundation for intrinsic meaning, establish man's purpose, and give life teleological value. Objective truth has been sacrificed to the subjective will or feelings of the individual. This shift in the understanding of identity is partly the outworking of postmodernism's attack on absolute truth. In the absence of

²¹ Trueman, *The Rise and Triumph of the Modern Self*, 48–49.

²² Trueman, *The Rise and Triumph of the Modern Self*, 50.

²³ Trueman, *The Rise and Triumph of the Modern Self*, 39.

²⁴ Trueman, *The Rise and Triumph of the Modern Self*, 39.

absolute truth, people are free to invent it for themselves.

Romans 1:18 talks about men suppressing the truth of God in unrighteousness.

Paul goes on to say that

although they knew God, they did not honor him as God or give thanks to him, but they became futile in their thinking, and their foolish hearts were darkened. Claiming to be wise, they became fools, and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images resembling mortal man and birds and animals and creeping things. (Rom 1:21–23)

Powlison explains, “Your instinctive sense of identity is skewed. In the act of suppressing the knowledge of God, a fallen heart suppresses true self-knowing. Whenever we forget God, we forget who we are.” American culture has moved away from God and a biblical understanding of the world, and with these, they have lost sight of truth and its impact on identity. Post-modernism attacked all objective truth claims, biblical and secular. In doing so, it suppressed the truth by denying its very existence. The assertion that there is no absolute truth opened the door to understanding reality through one’s feelings. That means that feelings have taken the place of reality and, for many, determine what they believe to be reality. Trueman expounds, “it is increasingly easy to imagine that reality is something we can manipulate according to our own wills and desires, and not something that we necessarily need to conform ourselves to or passively accept.”²⁵ This misunderstanding of reality has become an essential premise of postmodern American culture. The freedom to choose one’s identity in any way one sees fit has become of the utmost importance to society.²⁶

This way of understanding identity is self-centered and completely subjective. It is all about how one sees himself, regardless of the veracity of that assessment. This frees individuals to invent their identity and believe it to be whatever they want it to be.

²⁵ Trueman, *The Rise and Triumph of the Modern Self*, 41.

²⁶ Cruse, *The Christian’s True Identity*, 14.

People today live in a choose-your-own-identity culture. At any moment, a person can redefine or reinvent that identity. In the digital age, this has become more apparent through social media. People can invent who they are and put themselves on display to receive the approval, the likes, of their “friends.” Only the best pictures get onto a person’s page, and then only after a bit of editing and manipulation. There is a growing disconnection between people and their online identities. As Country music singer Brad Paisley jokingly opined in a song, “I’m so much cooler online.”²⁷ This relative shift in understanding people’s ever-changing identity through their feelings unknowingly leaves people in a place of insecurity and confusion as they contemplate their identity.

Gender Identity

The subject of identity is becoming more discussed in American culture today. The shift in the understanding of identity is nowhere more evident than in the realm of gender identity. Trueman writes, “the LBGTQ+ issues that now dominate our culture and our politics are simply symptoms of a deeper revolution in what it means to be a self.”²⁸ To say it in the order followed in this paper: the LBGTQ+ issues are an outworking of the relative shift in the understanding of identity. As Trueman discusses the modern expression “I am a woman trapped in a man’s body,” he writes, “such an expression is plausible only in a world in which the predominant way of thinking is poetic rather than mimetic . . . Human nature, one might say, becomes something individuals or societies invent for themselves.”²⁹ There was a time when such an expression would have been disregarded because of its blatant denial of reality. When reality itself becomes relative, then anything goes.

²⁷ Brad Paisley, “Online,” 5th Gear (Legacy Recordings, 2007).

²⁸ Trueman, *The Rise and Triumph of the Modern Self*, 384.

²⁹ Trueman, *The Rise and Triumph of the Modern Self*, 42.

It is essential to realize how society got here. Society has normalized homosexuality, pornography, and sex outside marriage. Trueman writes, “In addressing the behavior that has come to prominence through the sexual revolution, we are actually not so much speaking of practices as we are speaking of identities.”³⁰ American culture views the issues as not primarily about behavior but about identity. Opposition to such behaviors is seen by some as oppressive and a denial of people’s expression of individuality and the inner psychological happiness they desperately seek. An inner sense of well-being has become so important that those outside a person must affirm his understanding of identity. Rather than conforming their identity to external principles, people expect outside entities to conform to their inner beliefs. Failure for them to do so is an attack on a person’s well-being and, to many, is more severe and damaging than a physical attack. This means that it is not enough that people’s homosexuality or counter-biological beliefs about their gender be tolerated in society; they must now be affirmed. To tell a man he cannot compete as a female in college or Olympic sports is offensive and a denial of his identity.

Christians should not be surprised at this identity shift. Powlison explains that this happens when “your sense of identity comes unglued from the God who actually defines you.”³¹ What is surprising is how the church, broadly speaking, has bought into this shift in understanding. While many in the church still oppose homosexuality and the other sexual sins delineated above, they have gone along with the relative shift in culture’s understanding of identity. In many ways, the church, like the world around it, is fine with individuals inventing their own identity as long as it is one they approve of or like. Speaking of the church, Trueman says the LGBTQ+ movement’s “general culture of

³⁰ Trueman, *The Rise and Triumph of the Modern Self*, 51.

³¹ Powlison, “A Man’s Identity,” 78.

expressive individualism and of choice of identity is ours too.”³² He further states, “When it comes to how we think of ourselves, we are all expressive individualists now, and there is no way we can escape from this fact. It is the essence of the world in which we have to live and of which we are a part.”³³

Identity through Union

Identity needs to be understood with the proper foundation. People have looked increasingly at themselves, their experiences, and even their feelings to determine their understanding of identity. Trueman writes, “The idea that all human beings are of equal worth is rooted in the idea that all human beings are made in the image of God . . . expressive individualism has detached these concepts of individual dignity and value from any kind of grounding in sacred order.”³⁴ To understand identity correctly, one must begin with God and his Word as the foundation. One must look to the creator rather than the creation, including oneself, to define one’s identity. As the creator, God defines and gives objective meaning to identity. This God-given definition of identity is outside of a person’s inner subjective psychological understanding. For the Christian, this identity is tied to his union with Christ. A proper understanding of union with Christ is essential for Christians to rightly understand their identity and address the misunderstandings of self and identity presented by culture.

A correct understanding of identity begins with God as the foundation and is thoroughly God-centered. The problem of identity goes much deeper than a person’s job or family; it is foremost a spiritual issue. Grant Macaskill writes, “sin dwells in us, compromising our agency and controlling our passions: it is no longer I who act, but the

³² Trueman, *The Rise and Triumph of the Modern Self*, 386.

³³ Trueman, 386.

³⁴ Trueman, 387.

sin that dwells in me (Rom 7:17).”³⁵ Union with Christ addresses the problem and enables the Christian to say with Paul, “It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me” (Gal 2:20). In Christ, the image of God in man is restored. Christians are being conformed to the image of the Son. This means that human purpose is restored and further established. Identity is not relative, subjective, or meaningless; it is utterly God-centered. Pastor John Piper says:

Christian selfhood is not defined in terms of who we are in and of ourselves. It's defined in terms of what God does to us and the relationship he creates with us and the destiny he appoints for us. In other words as a Christian you cannot talk about your identity without talking about the action of God on you, the relationship of God with you, and the purpose of God for you. The biblical understanding of human self-identity is radically God-centered.³⁶

Christians live in a world that wrongly defines identity in a self-centered way. Identity is determined by the individual and based on his experiences and feelings. Cruse writes, “for the Christian, our identity is not something we earn, but something we are given . . . it is something that is intrinsically outside of ourselves in the person of Jesus Christ . . . Everything that we have and everything that we are is found *in* the person of Jesus Christ.”³⁷ This is true for all Christians. Identity is not invented, it is received. Theologian Sinclair Ferguson says, “all the treasures that are given to us in Jesus Christ are ours from the very beginning of the Christian life . . . They are given to every blood-bought child of God through faith in Jesus Christ.”³⁸

Union with Christ removes the subjectivity of understanding identity and the insecurity of such an approach. Pastor Adam G. Sinnett writes, “*in Christ*, we do not have

³⁵ Grant Macaskill, *Living in Union with Christ: Paul's Gospel and Christian Moral Identity* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2019), 7.

³⁶ John Piper, “Christian Identity and Christian Destiny,” *Desiring God*, April 17, 1994, <https://www.desiringgod.org/messages/christian-identity-and-christian-destiny>.

³⁷ Cruse, *The Christian's True Identity: What It Means to Be in Christ*, 8.

³⁸ Sinclair Ferguson, “Paul on Union with Christ,” (Message delivered at Basic Conference, Parkside Church, Chagrin, OH, 2010).

to wonder what God thinks of us . . . we do not have to wonder what his intentions are toward us . . . we don't have to wonder who we are any more. God declares who we are, *in Christ*.³⁹ Union with Christ means that the Christian is accepted in the beloved and is an honored child of God the Father. God publicly declares their value, worth, and even their glory.⁴⁰ This not only defines who they now are but also deals with the lingering issues of shame and rejection. All the blessings that belong to Jesus are the Christian's solely because of his union with Jesus. Apart from past failures and sins done by a person or done to a person, in Christ, the Christian is loved by the Father with the very same love he has for his Son. Union with Christ offers medicine to the suffering soul. It is important to note that understanding union with Christ does not undo past experiences such as abuse. Still, it does help to address the false understandings of shame, guilt, and rejection that often accompany abuse victims. One needs to understand that what one experienced or even how one feels about it does not define him; instead, God does in Christ. Positive and negative experiences are not magically removed from individuals when they understand their union with Christ; instead, union profoundly transforms their understanding of these things. Cruse writes, "To have an identity that is rooted in Christ will claim, cleanse, and control all other aspects of who we are. And identity in Christ will give renewed meaning, invigorating purpose, and God-glorifying direction to everything else we do in life."⁴¹ Union with Christ addresses shame by assuring Christians of their position in Christ and how God the Father views them. Edward Fisher, in *The Marrow of Modern Divinity*, describes union with Christ as a:

special, spiritual, and real union... Whence it must needs follow that you cannot be condemned, except Christ be condemned with you; neither can Christ be saved,

³⁹ Adam G Sinnett, "A Theology of Union: What It Means to Belong to God, In Christ, and Its Application" (PhD diss., Reformed Theological Seminary, 2017), 84.

⁴⁰ Welch, *Shame Interrupted*, 4.

⁴¹ Cruse, *The Christian's True Identity*, 12–13.

except you be saved with him And as by means of corporeal marriage all things become common betwixt man. and wife; even so, by means of this spiritual marriage, all things become common betwixt Christ and you; for when Christ hath married his spouse unto himself, he passeth over all his estate unto her; so that whatsoever Christ is or hath, you may boldly challenge as your own.⁴²

Though people may have faced or may yet face the condemnation of other men, they can know that in Christ, God will never condemn them.

2 Corinthians 5:21 says, “For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.” This passage describes what is sometimes called the great exchange, as sinners exchange their sins for the righteousness of Christ. Christians tend to think of this exchange simply in terms of their status, but Macaskill points out that “What Jesus takes to the cross is *who we are*, our very selves with all their guilt, and what we enjoy in union with him is precisely *who he is*, his fullness with all its glory.”⁴³ In Christ, the believer’s old self, with all its shame and self-condemnation, is put to death. This is precisely what is seen in Galatians 2:20, where Paul writes, “I have been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me.” Though Paul affirms, “It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me,” Paul has not ceased to exist. Macaskill observes that Paul “still greets the churches to which he writes as ‘Paul’ and still writes in a way that is shaped by the past.”⁴⁴ Those objective realities and experiences discussed above are still there and shape Paul somehow, but something greater has substantially changed him. His old way of viewing himself has died. Union with Christ has changed “his most basic sense of *who* he is, of the person that inhabits the space occupied by his body, of who gets the credit for what his limbs and lips do, of who he is becoming. He is not becoming a better version of

⁴² Edward Fisher, *The Marrow of Modern Divinity* (Fearn, Scotland: Christian Heritage, 2009), 166.

⁴³ Macaskill, *Living in Union with Christ*, 39.

⁴⁴ Macaskill, *Living in Union with Christ*, ix.

Paul; he is becoming Paul-in-Christ.”⁴⁵

Union with Christ addresses the issues of gender and race discussed above. Paul writes in Galatians 3:28, “There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is no male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.” Paul is not arguing that union with Christ does away with these distinctions in the way society has described gender as fluid or non-existent. Macaskill says instead, “they are enclosed within a larger reality that constitutes a more basic identity, shared by all participants: you are all one in Christ.”⁴⁶ Union with Christ points to a greater reality than these issues without doing away with gender or race. The unity that the world seeks over such matters will not be resolved by arguing over the problems themselves. Unity is found as people are united to Christ by faith and become one in him. This gives the church an excellent platform to model love and unity in Christ for people who are different from them out of the foundation of their union with Christ. Union with Christ, therefore, changes the Christian’s communal identity. Beyond race or gender, those who are united to Christ, the church, are one family that is identified foremost by being in Christ. Distinctions in gender and race are not dissolved; instead, they are glorified and shown to be beautiful in Christ.

Speaking of the relative shift in understanding identity discussed above, Trueman says, “This all makes the task of the church extremely difficult at this point in time because the framework for identity in wider society is deep rooted, powerful, and fundamentally antithetical to the kind of identity promoted as basic in the Bible.”⁴⁷ The church is increasingly talking about identity but not in relation to union with Christ. Unknowingly, they are following the same patterns that got them into the subjective

⁴⁵ Macaskill, ix.

⁴⁶ Macaskill, 56.

⁴⁷ Trueman, *The Rise and Triumph of the Modern Self*, 393.

morass in which they currently struggle. The Church has identified the problem but largely failed to point to the person of Jesus Christ as the solution. If more emphasis were placed on union with Christ, many Christians would not be deceived by the faulty logic and misunderstanding of identity set forth by the culture in which they live. Sinnett writes, “*in Christ*, God declares who we are: not our emotions, not our friends, not our family, not our coworkers, not our neighbors, not our suffering, not our past, not our present, not our future, not our successes, not our failures, and not our careers.”⁴⁸ This truth must be communicated in churches as a corrective to the false understandings of identity people are inundated with from postmodern American culture daily.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the weaknesses of defining one’s identity through one’s experiences and feelings have been addressed. One of the weaknesses of defining oneself by experiences is the temporary nature of such things. Union with Christ offers a solid foundation for facing the inevitable end to the things in life that one believes will profoundly shape one’s identity. Powlison writes, “all your temporary callings come to an end. When you grow old, frail, and helpless, you will become someone else’s charge and responsibility. But your true identity is imperishable. You will still abide in Christ. And when he appears, you will appear with him in glory.”⁴⁹ Relative and individual expressions of identity based on feelings are in constant flux. Only in Christ do Christians have an unchanging and eternal identity as the foundation of their existence. If identity is to be understood rightly, people cannot look at the horizontal plane of their experiences, the actions of others, or even their beliefs about themselves; they must look up to God. Powlison states, “Your true identity is who God says you are. You will never discover

⁴⁸ Sinnett, “A Theology of Union,” 84.

⁴⁹ Powlison, “A Man’s Identity,” 82.

who you are by looking inside yourself or listening to what others say. The Lord gets first word because he made you. He gets the daily word because you live before his face. He gets the last word because he will do the comprehensive life review.”⁵⁰ Only through union with Christ can a person understand his true Christian or in-Christ identity.

⁵⁰ Powlison, “A Man’s Identity,” 79.

CHAPTER 4
DETAILS AND DESCRIPTION OF THE PROJECT

Introduction

This chapter describes the ministry project, from its preparation through its completion. The project sought to provide a biblical understanding of the significance of the believer's union with Christ and the blessings that flow from this union to help the members of Grace Fellowship Church in Hazleton, Pennsylvania, to find their identity in Christ. The means utilized to accomplish that purpose were to assess the current understanding of Christian identity among the members of GFC, to develop an eight-session course on how union with Christ shapes the Christian's identity, and to increase members' understanding of the believer's identity in Christ through this curriculum. Implementation of the project began on August 7, 2022, and was completed on October 2, 2022.

Preparation

The preparation phase of the project began with reviewing the goals, purpose, and research of the project and developing a general direction and structure for the lessons. This work encompassed weeks 1–2 and included a title and text for each lesson of the curriculum. During week 3, the structure of the notebook was established, and a format for reflective questions was finalized. During the curriculum development, the individual questions were adjusted for each particular lesson, but the basic structure and type of questions were intended to be repeated.

During week 4, a diverse theological committee was formalized. The theological committee was comprised of five individuals. Two of these are present elders

of GFC: Dave Thompson and Paul Thompson. Two were the pastor emeritus of GFC, Tedd Tripp, and his wife, Margy, both authors and international speakers. The final member of the panel was Jonathan Cruse, pastor of Community Presbyterian Church of Kalamazoo, Michigan, and author of *The Christian's True Identity: What It Means to Be in Christ*.

The curriculum development stage of the project encompassed weeks 5–12. Although there was some overlap, this allowed one week to develop each of the eight lessons. The specifics of the curriculum are discussed below. Upon completion, each lesson was posted to a folder in Google Drive that was shared with the theological committee. This allowed the panel immediate access to the lessons and provided an avenue for feedback on the curriculum. It further offered accountability for me to stay on pace with completing the project.

During weeks 13–15, the curriculum was revised. There were several steps in this process. The theological committee received the Curriculum Evaluation Rubric and returned it. Their responses were considered, and some adjustments and revisions were made. The pre-training UCIS was also administered during this period, and the results were analyzed. Considering the items that scored the lowest allowed me to add additional material to some lessons to address specific weaknesses. The lowest-scoring items were 24 and 10, scoring 2.33 and 2.66, respectively.¹ Item 24 stated, “I believe that who I am has been largely shaped by my past experiences.” Item 10 said, “I often feel stagnant in my spiritual growth.” Four other items scored around 3.0 and led to some adjustments.²

Class Formation

GFC has eighty-seven adult members and averages around thirty in the adult

¹ Each measurable item of the survey was based on a 6-point Likert scale.

² Items 16 (3.08), 25 (3.0), 30 (3.08), and 32 (3.0).

English-speaking Sunday school. It was decided through discussions with the elders that the lessons would be taught in adult Sunday school. This allowed for the desired discussion and interaction to occur in a group setting in a way that preaching would not facilitate. It also provided the opportunity for another elder to implement his project simultaneously in the morning worship service.

The seminar, topic, and purpose were announced each Sunday for four weeks leading up to its beginning. Many church members were personally invited to participate in the weeks preceding implementation. The church was informed that participation in the project would require involvement in all eight lessons. As the project was partially implemented during the summer, and many possible participants would be away for at least one Sunday, the lessons were recorded and made available to absent participants.

Pre-Training Survey

Each participant agreed to complete a pre-training and post-training survey of twenty-eight items, plus an additional five demographical questions. The survey was initially prepared for a Project Methodology class and later revised with feedback from my theological committee before being submitted to the Ethics Committee at Southern Seminary. I received approval to conduct research from the Ethics Committee on July 20, 2022.

Physical copies of the UCIS were distributed on Sunday, July 24, two weeks before the classes began. An email was sent to the entire church to inform them of the opportunity to participate in the seminar and the need to complete the survey. A follow-up email was sent the week of the first class reminding everyone of the need to return their survey or to come to church early to complete it in person. They were further reminded to use a 4-digit code instead of their name to keep the surveys anonymous. Participants returned twenty-two pre-training surveys before the lessons began.

The UCIS responses were helpful in the final preparation of the project for implementation. The survey looked to identify the theological understanding of the subjects

of union with Christ and identity as well as the practical application of these subjects. The prepared curriculum was adjusted in light of the received survey responses over the two weeks leading up to the first lesson.

Curriculum

The first three lessons dealt with the more significant concepts of union with Christ, identity, and abiding in Christ. Much of chapters 2 and 3 were utilized in developing these first three lessons. The remaining lessons focused on the practical application of the believer's identity in Christ. Each participant was given a notebook with a detailed outline of each class, key texts for memorization and meditation, and practical application questions for every lesson.

Lesson 1 was titled "Every Spiritual Blessing." The primary text examined was Ephesians 1:3–14 and was based on the corresponding section of chapter 2 of this project. The key verse was Ephesians 1:3: "Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places." The main point communicated was that union with Christ is the source of every spiritual blessing the Christian enjoys. One aim of this lesson was to introduce the concept of union with Christ and demonstrate its importance in the life of every believer. The study considered the nature, extent, and source of the spiritual blessings that belong to those who are in Christ.

Lesson 2 was titled "Identity Problems." The primary text was Galatians 3:28: "There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is no male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus." The main point communicated was that a proper understanding of union with Christ is essential for Christians to rightly understand their identity and address the various misunderstandings of self and identity. For this lesson, chapter 3 of the project was restructured for teaching at GFC. Attention was given to defining identity, considering several ways one formulates his identity, and the lesson

concluded with how the Christian's identity is understood through union with Christ.

Lesson 3 was titled "Abiding in Christ" and examined John 1:15–21. The main point communicated was that believers are to abide in union with Christ by living out of that union and treasuring it above all else. The key verses were John 15:4–5: "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." This lesson utilized two sections of chapter 2 of the project: "Abiding in Union" (John 15:1–11) and "Union with Christ Produces a New Identity That is to be Treasured" (Phil 3:1–11). The concept of abiding in Christ formulates part of the application of all the subsequent lessons. This lesson defined abiding in Christ and showed the importance of living out of that union or purposefully filtering all of life through one's union with Christ.

Lesson 4 was titled "New Creation in Him," and 2 Corinthians 5:14–17 was the main text. The main point communicated was that the believer is a new person through his union with Christ. The key verse was 2 Corinthians 5:17: "Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come." The lesson compared the state of a person before and after salvation. It showed that the transformation brought by salvation and union with Christ is radical and changes the believer's identity. What one once was has died and what one is now is something completely new created by God.

Lesson 5 was titled "Made Righteous in Him." This lesson focused on a single verse, 2 Corinthians 5:17, "For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God." The main point communicated was that union with Christ means that the righteousness of Christ belongs to the believer so that God the Father sees the believer as righteous, just as Jesus is righteous. The lesson examined how Jesus became sin for the believer so that the believer might become the

righteousness of God in Christ. What one does can never justify him. The believer is righteous because he is in Christ.

Lesson 6 was titled “Adopted in Him.” The primary text was Galatians 4:3–7, and the key verse was verse seven: “So you are no longer a slave, but a son, and if a son, then an heir through God.” The main point communicated was that union with Christ means that the believer is now a child of God. This lesson showed the change in status and identity expressed in salvation and union with Christ. A person is born a slave and, through union with Christ, is adopted into the family of God and becomes a son just as Jesus is a son. This means God looks upon the believer as he does his own son. The believer is an heir of all that belongs to Jesus. God the Father loves, accepts, and protects the believer.

Lesson 7 was titled “Sanctified and Glorified in Him.” The primary text and key verse was 1 Corinthians 1:2: “To the church of God that is in Corinth, to those sanctified in Christ Jesus, called to be saints together with all those who in every place call upon the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, both their Lord and ours.” The main point communicated was that in union with Christ, believers are sanctified, are being sanctified, and one day will be glorified. While God looks at the believer and sees him as righteous, he also knows that he is a sinner and is not righteous in all he does. This lesson showed that being united to Christ means being conformed to the image of Christ. Christians are those who are like Christ, are being made more like Christ, and one day will be a lot like Christ. The change in identity is expressed well in Philippians 3:20–21: “Our citizenship is in heaven, and from it we await a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ, who will transform our lowly body to be like his glorious body, by the power that enables him even to subject all things to himself.”

Lesson 8 was titled “Loved and Cared for in Him.” Two primary texts were used: John 17:22–23 and 1 John 4:9–12. The main point communicated was that through union with Christ, Christians are loved by God with the same unchanging love the Father

has for the Son. The first passage contained the key verses, John 17:22–23: “The glory that you have given me I have given to them, that they may be one even as we are one, I in them and you in me, that they may become perfectly one, so that the world may know that you sent me and loved them even as you loved me.” As a final lesson, this was intended to address many other identity-defining blessings belonging to the believer in Christ. The love of God was dealt with more deeply, especially in the sacrificial propitiatory death of the Son and the unconditional nature of God’s love for the believer in the Son. Through union with Christ, the believer is provided for, has peace with God, is strengthened, has access to the Father through prayer, is given rest, and is, thus, complete in Christ. Each of these could comprise its own lesson, but due to time constraints, they were merely touched upon in further demonstration of the breadth of the blessings of union with Christ.

Lesson 9 was titled “The Ordinances and Union.”³ This and the following lesson addressed the believer’s corporate identity in the church through union with Christ. The main point communicated was that union with Christ is manifested in the ordinances of baptism and the Lord’s supper, which God has given his church. Three texts were used in this lesson, with each text briefly explicated as a significant point in the lesson outline. Romans 6:1–11 showed the believer’s incorporation into Jesus’ death, burial, and resurrection through union with Christ. Colossians 2:6–15 told of the blessings symbolized in baptism. The Lord’s Supper was addressed through 1 Corinthians 10:16–17 and 21. Baptism and the Lord’s Supper are a reminder of the believer’s need for union with Christ and his ongoing participation in Christ.

Lesson 10 was titled “The Church, His Body.” The primary text was Romans

³ Lessons 9 and 10 were not a part of the original plan for the project and were given after the post-project survey. They are included here and, in the appendix, as they may prove helpful for others using this material in the future.

12:4–5, and verse 5 was the key verse: “so we, though many, are one body in Christ, and individually members one of another.” The main point communicated was that through union with Christ, Christians are corporately united to Christ and each other. The lesson considered various expressions of the church’s union with Christ. These included: the church corporately abiding in Christ; a living temple; the body of Christ; and the bride of Christ. This lesson helped conclude the corporate identity teaching through union with Christ. In Christ, believers are united to one another and belong to a community created by God.

Implementation

The eight-lesson teaching began during week 16 of the project on Sunday, August 7th, with two lessons. The first lesson was delivered as a sermon in the 10:00 a.m. worship service. This was the only message that was preached in Sunday morning worship. The second lesson was given during adult Sunday school at 11:45 a.m. that same day. Every other lesson was taught during adult Sunday school, beginning at 11:45 a.m. and concluding at 12:30 p.m. Having the first two lessons on the same day allowed a far larger group to hear the first lesson that introduced union with Christ and the believer’s spiritual blessings through that union. It also allowed participants to become more immersed in the subject matter at the onset of the study.

Due to the growth of the Spanish Ministry of GFC, a drastic change was made to the Sunday schedule between the beginning of the project and its implementation. Seven months before the first class, worship and Sunday school time were reversed. Previously GFC had English Sunday school at 9:30 a.m., English worship at 10:30 a.m., Spanish worship at 1:00 p.m., and Spanish Sunday school at 2:30 p.m. The schedule change allowed for greater unity in the church by combining all of the children’s Sunday school classes. The new schedule was 10:00 a.m. English worship, 11:45 a.m. Sunday school (with only the adults having classes separated by language), and 1:00 p.m. Spanish

worship. On the second Sunday of each month, the church gathered to have a church-wide bilingual Lord's Supper and potluck meal between the English and Spanish worship services. With the adjustment to the schedule, this now occurs during the Sunday school hour and in place of Sunday school. This change resulted in the eight-lesson seminar taking ten weeks to complete, with no class occurring on week 17 (August 14th) and week 21 (September 11th).

The class met in the usual location of adult Sunday School, the church's sanctuary. Sitting in rows of pews is not ideal for group participation. Still, the Sunday school class was accustomed to this format, and every other available meeting space was already being utilized. Meeting in the church's sanctuary allowed for the use of the sound system and recording devices.

A three-ringed binder was given to each participant at the beginning of the seminar. The binder contained a title page and a detailed outline of the first two lessons. Each week at the beginning of the lesson, a detailed outline for that lesson was given to be added to the binder. This further encouraged participants to keep up with their notes and bring them to class. The lesson outlines also included the text or texts for the lesson, a one-sentence summary of the major point, a key verse for memorization, and reflection questions. The reflection questions were essential in helping participants to internalize the subject matter and apply it to their specific situation. Some of these were discussed in class, but most were done individually over the course of the week between classes. Beginning with lesson 4, the participants were introduced to "Think-Feel-Know" questions I originally learned from Dr. Joel Beeke in 2017.⁴ These proved especially helpful in applying the truths of the lesson to the participants' lives and taught them a model for viewing all of life through union with Christ.

⁴ See appendix 5.

Discussions with the theological committee about further implications of union with Christ and the scope and progression of the lessons led to their suggestion of adding two lessons on the believer's corporate identity in Christ. Lesson 9 addressed the ordinances, and Lesson 10 was on the church as the body of Christ. Since these lessons were not a part of the original plan for the project, they were given after the post-project survey and were not included in the assessment. These lessons were further postponed by the Lord's Supper and potluck meal on week 25 (October 9) and a guest pastor at GFC on week 26 (October 16). Lesson 9 was taught on week 27 (October 23), and Lesson 10 on week 28 (October 30).

Assessment

Upon completion of lesson 8 on October 2, 2022, the participants received the post-training UCIS in person. Participants were reminded to use the same four-digit PIN and to complete the survey in its entirety. They were given until the following Sunday to return the UCIS. Many participants completed the survey at once, while some returned it the following Sunday.

During weeks 25 and 26, while I was not teaching, the post-training surveys were analyzed and compared.⁵ While there were twenty-two pre-training surveys initially submitted, only twelve post-training surveys were returned. This was unfortunate but consistent with an observed decline in attendance. A t-test for dependent samples was used to assess whether those who completed the eight lessons had made statistically significant progress. Various other comparative evaluations were used to further determine the impact of the lessons on participants. Overall, the assessment of the pre- and post-UCIS confirmed that the project made a statistically significant difference in the theological understanding and practical application of the subjects of union with Christ

⁵ For detailed results of the survey, including a t-test analysis, see appendix 4.

and Christian identity covered in the lessons.

Conclusion

The Bible demonstrates that the Christian's identity is determined by his union with Christ. Unfortunately, many in the Church are negatively impacted by present circumstances and experiences or define their identity by their past struggles or abuse. Through teaching and reflective questions, this project served GFC by helping participants see the significance of union with Christ, who they are in Christ, and understanding their identity based on union with Christ. The project has allowed those at GFC to appreciate and rest in their standing in Christ. While the preparation and implementation of this project were in some ways unique to GFC, the biblical truths communicated could be adapted and reproduced in many varying ministry contexts.

CHAPTER 5

EVALUATION OF THE PROJECT

Introduction

This chapter evaluates the implementation of the ministry project at Grace Fellowship Church in Hazleton, Pennsylvania (GFC). Assessment of the project will include an evaluation of the project's purpose, goals, strengths, and weaknesses. In addition, this chapter identifies ways to improve the project and suggests modifications for future implementations at GFC or any other churches that might use it. Finally, this chapter concludes with theological and personal reflections on the project.

Evaluation of the Purpose

The purpose of this project was to teach the significance of the believer's union with Christ to the members of GFC. The importance of union with Christ was primarily demonstrated through an understanding of the believer's identity in Christ. The development of this project addressed a specific need observed through counseling and ministry at GFC. Many of those at GFC have been deeply impacted by past or present experiences and circumstances. While biblical truth has been faithfully taught for decades at GFC, the practical application of these truths has proven more difficult. This is especially true for those who have suffered years of being criticized, demeaned, devalued, and abused.

This project sought to meet this need by providing a theological foundation of union with Christ and imparting a robust understanding of Christian identity based on union with Christ. The concept of abiding in Christ proved helpful for many participants.

They were encouraged to live out of their union with Christ by purposefully filtering all of life through their union with Christ. The participants learned that the way God views the Christian is through Christ. This understanding has helped many to appreciate and rest in their standing in Christ. Those who completed the lessons have acquired a more vigorous appreciation of what it means to be a new creation in Christ (2 Cor 5:17).

The statistical data and positive feedback demonstrate that the participants attained a more biblically accurate understanding of their identity and the significance of union with Christ. The data obtained reveals a statistically significant difference in the understanding and practices of the participants who completed the curriculum. While an eight-week teaching curriculum is unlikely to change a church culture completely, the foundation for change has begun at GFC.

Evaluation of the Goals

Three goals were developed to assess the effectiveness of the project. The first goal was to assess the current understanding of union with Christ and Christian identity among the members of GFC. The second goal was to develop an eight-session course on how union with Christ shapes the Christian's identity. The third goal sought to increase members' understanding of the believer's identity in Christ through this curriculum. Each goal was examined to determine if the project's goals were met. The examination showed that this project achieved all three goals.

Goal One

The first goal was to assess the current understanding of Christian identity among the members of GFC. This goal was measured by administering the Understanding of Christian Identity Survey (UCIS) in a Sunday school setting prior to goals two and three and two weeks before beginning the teaching.¹ For this goal to be

¹ See appendix 1.

considered successfully met, at least twelve adults needed to complete the UCIS, and their responses needed to be analyzed using descriptive statistics to gain a clearer insight into their understanding of union with Christ and Christian identity.

Twenty-one unique respondents completed the pre-training UCIS. This surpassed the requirement of twelve respondents. An analysis of the responses ensued. Section 1 contained items 1–5 and evaluated the participants' demographic information. Of the twenty-one participants who completed the initial survey, eighteen were members of GFC, and three were regular attendees. Only three of the participants held the office of elder or deacon. All the participants considered themselves to be Christians except for one. The length of time participants had been a Christian and their age groups were diverse. Four participants have been a Christian for 0–5 years,² one for 6–10 years, two for 11–15 years, three for 16–20 years, two for 21–25 years, and nine for more than 26 years. Three participants were 18–24 years old, three were 25–34, two were 35–44, four were 45–54, four were 55–64, and five were over 65 years old. Eight participants were male and thirteen were female.

The survey was tailored to accurately assess the understanding and practice of the participants in the subject of the training curriculum. The survey evaluated three specific categories: understanding of the doctrine of union with Christ, understanding of Christian identity, and spiritual life or the practical application of the first two categories in the participant's life. The items were divided into seven items on union with Christ, ten on Christian identity, and eleven on spiritual life.³ Union with Christ was covered in items 6, 7, 8, 15, 20, 22, and 23. The participants' understanding of Christian identity was addressed in items 14, 19, 24, 25, 26, 27, 30, 31, 32, and 33. Spiritual life and practical application were measured in items 9, 10, 11, 12, 13, 16, 17, 18, 21, 28, and 29.

² This number includes the one participant who did not consider herself to be a Christian.

³ See Table A5 in appendix 6.

The results were analyzed before making revisions to the lessons. The highest-scoring category by mean was union with Christ at 4.28.⁴⁵ This was followed by the spiritual life items at 4.06.⁶ Finally, the items concerning Christian identity were the lowest at 3.72, more than half a point lower than the union with Christ category.⁷

Table 1. Comparison of pre-survey results by category

Union with Christ	Spiritual life	Christian identity
4.28	4.06	3.72

High scores on individual items represented agreement with the item or statement.⁸ The highest-scoring items were 29 (5.29), 15 (5.19), 19 (4.76), 31 (4.71), and 12 (4.62). Item 29 stated, “I am aware of God’s presence in my life.” Item 15 was, “I know several spiritual blessings I have received in Christ.” The next highest item was 19, “I do not believe I will ever overcome past hurts I have suffered.” Item 31 specified, “I regularly reflect on God’s love for me.” The final item, 12, stated, “I am comfortable explaining God’s purpose for my life from a biblical standpoint.” Of the five highest-scoring items, one concerned union with Christ, and two addressed Christian identity and spiritual life.

Given that union with Christ was the highest-scoring category, having only one item in the highest five was surprising. The item was about knowledge of spiritual

⁴ Scores are based on a 6-point Likert scale.

⁵ See table A7 in Appendix 6.

⁶ See table A8 in Appendix 6.

⁷ See table A6 in Appendix 6.

⁸ See table A10 in Appendix 6.

blessings. This was an important topic I intended to address in the class. In light of this result, it became apparent that the connection between the knowledge of these blessings and their application in the believer's life needed to be demonstrated. The other high-scoring items reinforced the need for practical application. Three items focused on understanding God's presence, love, and purpose for one's life. The one item that spoke of past hurts was a hopeful answer that these would one day be overcome.

The lowest-scoring items were 24 and 32, with a 2.76 average. Item 24 stated "I believe that who I am has been largely shaped by my past experiences," and 32 was "I often struggle with shame." The third lowest, at 2.90, was item 10, "I often feel stagnant in my spiritual growth." The fourth lowest, at 3.10, was item 16, "I feel down when things do not go well in the course of the day." After that, items 9, 25, and 27 all scored 3.38. A few early conclusions were drawn from these results. The lowest-scoring items dealt with identity, particularly past experiences and shame. The next two lowest-scoring items both dealt with spiritual life. Of the next three, two addressed identity and one spiritual life. These results were consistent with the data from the categories. While the participants were mostly optimistic about their knowledge of union with Christ, a disconnect appeared in applying it to their understanding of their identity and spiritual life. From these results, I worked to make the practical application of union with Christ a vital part of each lesson.

Goal Two

The second goal was to develop an eight-session course on how union with Christ shapes the Christian's identity. The initial structure for each lesson was designed to accomplish this goal. A lesson a week was then formulated over the course of eight weeks. Each lesson was posted to a folder in Google Drive and then shared with the theological committee. This allowed the panel to provide feedback on individual lessons before the final evaluation. The first two lessons introduced the significance of the doctrine of union

with Christ and the subject of identity. The third lesson communicated the concept of abiding in Christ or living out of one's union with Christ. This was followed by five lessons, each addressing one of the blessings flowing out of this union and defining the Christian's identity.

The entire curriculum was completed and submitted to an expert theological panel for evaluation and additional feedback. The panel consisted of two elders of GFC, the pastor emeritus of GFC and his wife, and one pastor outside of GFC. One has published a book on union with Christ, and another is currently writing on it. These five experts provided constructive suggestions along with objective evaluations of the curriculum. The theological panel utilized a rubric to evaluate the curriculum's biblical faithfulness, scope, and applicability.⁹ To be considered successful, a minimum of 90 percent of the evaluation criterion had to meet or exceed the sufficient level.

Each rubric had nine evaluation criteria for a total of forty-five criteria among the five experts. Of these forty-five criteria, twenty-nine received the highest rating of exemplary, thirteen were considered sufficient, and three failed to meet the sufficient level, receiving a response of "requires attention." Two of the "requires attention" scores were on the criterion of "The lessons were clear and could be re-taught by another person." As a result of these scores and the accompanying feedback, efforts were made to clarify the lessons for those who may use the material in the future. All other feedback was considered, and slight revisions were made where necessary. The panel's evaluation showed that 93.33 percent of the responses met or exceeded the sufficient level. Therefore goal 2 was achieved.

Goal Three

The third goal was to increase members' understanding of the believer's

⁹ See appendix 2.

identity in Christ through this curriculum. This goal was measured by administering the UCIS a second time after the completion of the curriculum to the same participants. This post-curriculum survey was used to measure the change in the understanding of identity among the members of GFC. Although twenty-one participants took the initial survey, only twelve attended all the classes and completed the post-curriculum survey. This decrease in participants was disappointing, but the twelve participants met the minimum sufficient amount and gave the necessary information to measure the effectiveness of the study.¹⁰ The nine unpaired pre-surveys were discarded,¹¹ and the success of this goal was measured by the remaining twelve participants who had completed both surveys.¹²

The comparison results showed that eight of the twelve participants attained a double-digit increase in the average of their answers.¹³ The participant with the highest growth averaged forty percent higher on the post-survey. Only one participant demonstrated a decrease in his or her average score. This anomaly may be explained by one participant undergoing an extenuating life crisis and counseling need during the study. Together, the twelve participants averaged over fourteen percent higher scores on the second survey.

A comparison of the average answer to individual items among these twelve participants also showed a significant increase.¹⁴ Item 24 was the lowest-scoring item before and after the class, but it improved by fourteen percent and was the only item to score under a 3.0 on the Likert scale. Item 12 decreased by five and a half percent and was the only item to have decreased after the lesson. Items 18 and 27 scored the same

¹⁰ The detailed results of the comparative pre- and post-surveys are presented in appendix 6.

¹¹ See table A9 in Appendix 6.

¹² See table A1 for the pre-survey results and table A2 for post-survey results in Appendix 6.

¹³ See table A3 in Appendix 6.

¹⁴ See table A4 in Appendix 6.

before and after the class. The most significant increase was seen in items 22 and 14, which scored forty-two percent and thirty-nine percent better, respectively. Of the twenty-eight items, twenty-three improved by over five percent, and seventeen scored a 4.5 or higher compared to only eight in the pre-survey. There was also improvement across each category of the items. The union with Christ items increased from an average of 4.28 to 4.89, the Christian identity items rose from 3.72 to 3.93, and the spiritual life items increased from 4.06 to 4.48.

The goal was met when the t-test for dependent samples demonstrated a positive, statistically significant difference between the pre-and post-training survey scores. The results from the pre-test ($\mu = 110.3$, $SD = 17.4$) and post-test ($\mu = 122.4$, $SD = 14.8$) resulted in an improvement in understanding of the believer's identity in Christ, $t(11) = -3.498$, $p < .004$.

Table 2. T-test results

	<i>Pre-test total</i>	<i>Post-test total</i>
Mean	110.3333	122.4167
Variance	302.7879	220.0833
Observations	12	12
Pearson Correlation	0.735435	
Hypothesized Mean Difference	0	
df	11	
t Stat	-3.4982	
P(T<=t) one-tail	0.002493	
t Critical one-tail	1.795885	
P(T<=t) two-tail	0.004986	
t Critical two-tail	2.200985	

Strengths of the Project

Several strengths were identified throughout the process of reflection and evaluation that contributed to the project's success. The first strength was the focus of the

project. A significant need at GFC was addressed by focusing on union with Christ and Christian identity. The dramatic increase in answers to specific items evidenced this. Item 22, which states, “Union with Christ is an important doctrine in my daily life,” saw a forty-two percent increase. This demonstrates both the growth in understanding of this vital doctrine as well as the importance of it in the life of the participant. Item 14, “I am confident in answering the item of who I am,” increased by thirty-nine percent. This further showed that the understanding of union with Christ was not just theoretical but has made a practical impact. Those who participated in the class are more confident in their unchangeable identity in Christ; they are looking less to their past and present circumstances and experiences to define who they are.

A second strength was equipping participants to interact with their past and present circumstances and experiences biblically. One way this was accomplished was by teaching the concept of abiding in Christ. This was primarily communicated by purposefully filtering all of life through one’s union with Christ. With a solid foundational understanding of their union with Christ, participants could understand that what happens to them daily or what has happened in the past cannot change their identity and standing before God. After each lesson, they worked to apply that lesson’s truth to their life. When the study taught that they were righteous in Christ, they were encouraged to filter the past abuse and degrading comments through this truth. The abuse of others does not make one less righteous or worthy before the Lord. Each week they practiced living out of what they biblically knew to be true rather than what they thought or felt. This practice equipped the participants to preach the gospel to themselves daily and rest in the finished work of Christ.

A third strength of the project was the binder, which contained all the class notes, key texts for memorization, and questions for reflection and application. Participants gave very positive feedback on this. Many appreciated being able to review Sunday’s lesson throughout the week. The questions gave a pattern for reference to use in

various situations or struggles. It provided them with an enduring resource they could return to for further study or utilize as a training tool to equip others.

A final strength was the use of the expert panel in reviewing the messages. I saw this as very helpful, and the elders of GFC quickly picked up on the benefits of such a practice. After completing the course, the elders began to keep a folder online for sermon and teaching evaluation. The elders will post their material in this folder and receive feedback from other elders before preaching or teaching the material. This is the first time GFC has had any venue for review and input on messages before they are delivered. The practice has benefited the teacher, and the rest of the congregation with the quality of the content taught.

Weaknesses of the Project

Although there were many strengths of the project, the project also had several weaknesses. First, the required attendance and the way it was communicated proved to be a weakness. The class was announced well in advance to all members of GFC, both verbally and by email. In the communication attendance was strongly stressed, and a commitment to be at all the classes or watch the video of each missed lesson was required. The church was also told there would be a notebook for review with questions to consider each week. This information resulted in some misunderstanding and intentional avoidance of the class. Some members believed that if they missed any Sundays during this period, they should not attend. Unfortunately, others were unwilling to make the weekly effort to complete the class. Class attendance decreased over time, seemingly from the belief that having missed one class they could not continue to attend. The Sunday after the original eight lessons were complete, class attendance returned to the original size of the class at lesson 1. From the feedback received, this is because of the above-stated misunderstanding rather than a disinterest in the subject matter.

A second weakness was the availability of the class to those who missed a

lesson. The intention was for those who missed a class to view a video of the study at home before attending the next lesson. This was also important for one home-bound member who wanted to participate in the class. When the class was over, I learned this was not happening as intended. GFC has rotating volunteers in the sound booth. Each week I communicated the necessity of videoing the lesson and ensured the recording light was showing on the camera. After the class was finished, I was told that some original participants could not watch the video after missing a class due to them not being uploaded online. This resulted in some ceasing to attend class and contributed to the first weakness. Upon searching the church website and computer hard drive, only four of the eight messages were located. The elders had hoped to have the complete video series available to share with individuals as needed in the future. I should have checked weekly to make sure the proper content was available.

A third weakness was the timing and arrangement of the class. August, when the class began, is historically the church's most poorly attended month of the year. One main reason for this is that many families take summer vacations in August before school starts. The project was also implemented at a time in which Covid-19 was affecting some families in the church, resulting in whole families missing some Sundays. Finally, the schedule change instituted at GFC reduced the number of potential participants. Nine members, including three elders and a deacon, who would previously have been in the class, could not attend due to their participation or service in the Spanish-speaking adult Sunday school class that occurred simultaneously. The schedule change also meant that GFC did not have Sunday school for two Sundays during the class due to a churchwide Lord's Supper service and fellowship dinner. I avoided three missed Sundays by teaching the first two lessons on the same Sunday. These missed Sundays meant the class was two weeks longer than it ideally could have been. The added time meant some lessons were two weeks apart. This hindered momentum and progress and gave more time for participants to forget content between lessons. It further required a more extended time

commitment from participants.

A fourth weakness of the project was that another elder at GFC was in the same program of study and had to implement his project during the same period. His project was a series of sermons. This meant that there was no opportunity to move my project from Sunday school to a sermon series once the schedule change was implemented and the prior weakness was realized. It further meant that some members were simultaneously involved in two intense training projects.

A final weakness was that the class was a part of this project and had inherent limitations. The nature of the project changed how I would typically teach the material and the freedom to make adjustments while teaching. It was apparent early on that I had prepared too much material and needed more time for meaningful interaction. One reason for deciding to do these lessons as a Sunday school class was the desire for interaction with the participants. By the time the class was taught, I had committed over two years to studying the subject of union with Christ and identity. The content of the lessons was solid and theologically dense but the content covered was often massive as I sought to communicate as much of what I had learned as possible. Due to the prescribed nature of the project, I felt compelled to get through all the prepared material in the predetermined eight lessons. Ordinarily, I would have divided some of the messages and added extra lessons to accommodate the volume of material and facilitate increased interaction.

What I Would Do Differently

To help those who may attempt this project in the future, I recommend the following modifications to improve the project. Firstly, I would address the areas of weakness stated in the prior section. More of the church needs to be involved to affect a cultural change in the church and not just a difference in a small group of individuals. This could be accomplished through a different venue for teaching, such as the morning worship service. It could also be achieved through greater attendance at Sunday school.

In hindsight, it would have been better to emphasize the importance of the class over the necessity of perfect attendance to participate. It also would have been wise to have the same person assigned to video the lesson each week and ensure that all lessons were uploaded to the website.

Secondly, the class would have benefited from more lessons and much more interaction. Lesson 2 contained too much information and should be split between points 3 and 4 in the outline. The section on identity through union should stand alone. The two lessons could be divided into identity problems and an identity solution. Lessons 9 & 10 ideally would have been included in the curriculum. An additional lesson on marriage and union with Christ based on Ephesians 5:22–33 would have helped apply the doctrine of union with Christ to the real-world situations participants faced.

Finally, participants would benefit from continuity in the class with no weeks off. The nature of the lessons might best be served in the context of a seminar or week-long class. This condenses the time frame of the completion of the course so that more is remembered in between lessons. It could also facilitate adjustments in the length of classes in a way that Sunday services cannot.

Theological and Personal Reflections

I have grown personally through the project's research, teaching, and application. The implications of union with Christ are further reaching than I had imagined before beginning this project. The more I have understood, the greater my joy in union with Christ and in the person of Christ has grown. I have become increasingly convinced that God has “blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places.”¹⁵ Even though the extent of the blessings is incomprehensible, one comes to Jesus for Jesus and not the benefits one receives. I have been overwhelmed with the love

¹⁵ Eph. 1:3.

of God that he has lavished upon believers. I believe that the truths from this project have better equipped me to serve and help others. I have a solid foundation of identity to which I can point others. It has also positively impacted my preaching, especially in the area of application.

Reviewing the project and its content, I am left with several theological reflections. First, union with Christ removes any ground of boasting by the individual and any hope of being justified by one's righteousness. The Christian's standing before God is secure because his standing is in Christ. Jesus gets all the credit. Second, abiding in Christ means more than simply remaining in him or staying a Christian. It entails living out of the truth that one is united to Christ in everyday situations. Third, God the Father loves the Christian with the very same love he has for his Son, Jesus. God could not possibly love the believer more than he does. This also means that nothing I do can cause him to love me less. This does not give me a license to sin; rather, knowledge of this love constrains me from sin and encourages me to honor and obey the one who loves me so deeply.

Conclusion

The purpose of the project, to teach the significance of the believer's union with Christ, was achieved, and the three goals introduced in chapter 1 were met. While these results are encouraging, I also realize it is only the beginning of change at GFC, and only a tiny percentage of the members have completed all the lessons. In the coming months, I hope to revise the lessons with the suggested modifications and teach them to many more members of GFC. I pray God will continue to use this project powerfully and cause more of his children to abide in their union with Christ and know that they are a new creation in Christ (2 Cor 5:17).

APPENDIX 1
UNDERSTANDING OF CHRISTIAN IDENTITY
SURVEY

The following survey was used to provide a picture of the understanding of union with Christ and Christian identity among the participants.

UNDERSTANDING OF CHRISTIAN IDENTITY
SURVEY

Agreement to Participate

The research in which you are about to participate is designed to identify the current understanding of the doctrine of union with Christ and its significance to the participant. This research is being conducted by Chad Bennett for the purpose of collecting data for a ministry project. In this research, you will be asked to assess your understanding of Christian identity and union with Christ. Any information you provide will be held *strictly confidential*, and at no time will your name be reported, or your name identified with your responses. *Participation in this study is totally voluntary and you are free to withdraw from the study at any time.* By completion of this survey, you are giving informed consent for the use of your responses in this research.

- I agree to participate
 I do not agree to participate

Date: _____

4-digit Personal Identification #: _____
(Please use the same number when repeating the survey after completing the lessons).

Gender: **Male** _____ **Female** _____

Section I

The first section of this survey will obtain some demographic information.

Directions: Answer the following multiple-choice questions by placing a check next to the appropriate answer.

1. Would you consider yourself
 ___ A. an occasional visitor of GFC
 ___ B. a regular attender who is not a member of GFC
 ___ C. a member of GFC
 ___ D. none of the above

2. Would you consider yourself a Christian?
 ___ A. Yes
 ___ B. No

3. Are you an elder or deacon at GFC?
 ___ A. Yes
 ___ B. No

4. How many years have you been a believer?
 ___ A. 0-5
 ___ B. 6-10
 ___ C. 11-15
 ___ D. 16-20
 ___ E. 21-25
 ___ F. 26 and over
5. What is your age in years?
 ___ A. 18-24
 ___ B. 25-34
 ___ C. 35-44
 ___ D. 45-54
 ___ E. 55-64
 ___ F. 65 and over

Section II

Directions: Please answer the items using the following scale:

SD = strongly disagree

D = disagree

DS = disagree somewhat

AS = agree somewhat

A = agree

SA = strongly agree

- | | | | | | | |
|---|----|---|----|----|---|----|
| 6. I often reflect on biblical texts that speak of my union with Christ. | SD | D | DS | AS | A | SA |
| 7. I am comfortable explaining how Christ lives in me (Gal. 2:20). | SD | D | DS | AS | A | SA |
| 8. I am comfortable explaining how I am in Christ. | SD | D | DS | AS | A | SA |
| 9. I am often discouraged about my relationship with God. | SD | D | DS | AS | A | SA |
| 10. I often feel stagnant in my spiritual growth. | SD | D | DS | AS | A | SA |
| 11. My spiritual life undergoes drastic ups and downs. | SD | D | DS | AS | A | SA |
| 12. I am comfortable explaining God's purpose for my life from a biblical standpoint. | SD | D | DS | AS | A | SA |

13.	I am regularly growing in Christ	SD	D	DS	AS	A	SA
14.	I am confident in answering the question of “who am I?”	SD	D	DS	AS	A	SA
15.	I know several spiritual blessings I have received in Christ.	SD	D	DS	AS	A	SA
16.	I feel down when things do not go well in the course of my day.	SD	D	DS	AS	A	SA
17.	I have a strong desire to read the Bible.	SD	D	DS	AS	A	SA
18.	In times of suffering God seems distant.	SD	D	DS	AS	A	SA
19.	I do not believe I will ever overcome past hurts I have suffered.	SD	D	DS	AS	A	SA
20.	I know my place in the body of Christ.	SD	D	DS	AS	A	SA
21.	I find it difficult to commune with God when I have had a bad day.	SD	D	DS	AS	A	SA
22.	Union with Christ is an important doctrine in my daily life.	SD	D	DS	AS	A	SA
23.	I can explain how I receive all my spiritual blessings.	SD	D	DS	AS	A	SA
24.	I believe that who I am has been largely shaped by my past experiences.	SD	D	DS	AS	A	SA
25.	I believe that who I am is largely shaped by my present circumstances.	SD	D	DS	AS	A	SA
26.	I often question how God could love me.	SD	D	DS	AS	A	SA
27.	I often believe I have more in common with Adam than Jesus.	SD	D	DS	AS	A	SA
28.	I feel empowered by Jesus to do what he has called me to do.	SD	D	DS	AS	A	SA

29.	I am aware of God's presence in my life.	SD	D	DS	AS	A	SA
30.	The way I was raised determines how I react to trials.	SD	D	DS	AS	A	SA
31.	I regularly reflect on God's love for me.	SD	D	DS	AS	A	SA
32.	I often struggle with shame.	SD	D	DS	AS	A	SA
33.	I believe that what I do determines who I am.	SD	D	DS	AS	A	SA

APPENDIX 2

CURRICULM EVALAUTION RUBRIC

The following rubric was used to evaluate the union with Christ curriculum and was distributed to the select expert panel described in the goal section of chapter 1. This panel will evaluate the course material to ensure it is biblically faithful, sufficiently thorough, and practically applicable.

CURRICULUM EVALUATION RUBRIC

Name of Evaluator: _____ Date: _____

Union with Christ Curriculum Evaluation Tool					
1 = insufficient 2 = requires attention 3 = sufficient 4 = exemplary					
Criteria	1	2	3	4	Comments
Biblical Accuracy					
Each lesson was biblically and theologically sound.					
Scope					
The material is clearly relevant to the issue of union with Christ and Christian identity.					
The content of the curriculum sufficiently covers each issue it is designed to address.					
Pedagogy					
Each lesson was clear, containing a big idea.					
Each lesson contains points of practical application.					
Each lesson provides opportunities for participant interaction with the material.					
Practicality					
At the end of the course, participants will better be able to understand the blessings of their union with Christ.					
At the end of the course, participants will be better able to understand their identity in Christ.					
The lessons were clear and could be re-taught by another person.					

Other Comments:

APPENDIX 3

LESSON HANDOUTS

The following handouts reflect what was distributed to participants for each of the eight lessons. The handouts represent the full notes used in teaching formatted in an outline, with the main point, key verse(s) for memorization, and questions for reflection. The same basic structure was utilized throughout the eight weeks of instruction.

Lesson 1
Ephesians 1:3–14
Every Spiritual Blessing

Main Point:

Union with Christ is the source of every spiritual blessing the Christian enjoys.

Introduction -

- There has been an increasing focus on the self and existential questions of identity.
 - For the believer, such questions are addressed in God’s Word, specifically through the believer’s union with Christ.
 - The Bible reveals that the Christian’s union with Christ defines their identity and is the source of all spiritual blessings they enjoy.
- We may not give much time to pondering our union with Christ.
 - Paul uses the phrase “in Christ” or some other expression of union or participation in Christ close to 170 times.
 - It was obviously of great importance to him.
- Our text begins with Paul praising “the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ” for the spiritual blessings he has given to his people (Eph 1:3).
- He specifically discusses some of these blessings while acknowledging the blessings are further reaching than what is contained.
- Consider:
 - The nature of the spiritual blessings
 - The extent of the spiritual blessings
 - The source of the spiritual blessings.

The Nature of the Spiritual Blessings – Ephesians 1:3

- Verse 3 says, “every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places.”
- Spiritual vs. material
 - God, who is the creator of all things, is the source of all blessings, material and spiritual.
 - Material blessings are enjoyed by believers and unbelievers alike.

- Matthew 5:45 affirms, “For he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust.”
- The spiritual blessings are mitigated through Christ only to those who are united to Him.
- “Spiritual” distinguishes a unique set of blessings that belongs to the Christian through their union with Christ.
- “Spiritual” here may also pertain to the application of such blessings through the work of the Holy Spirit.
- “Heavenly places” does not refer to where the blessings will be received or when they will be received.
 - The believer is united to Christ, who is in heaven
 - Ephesians 2:6–7, “...and raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus, so that in the coming ages he might show the immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus.”
 - The blessings flow from the heavenly places where Christ is seated on the throne.
 - Those spiritual, heavenly blessings which belong to Christ, also belong to the believer through their union with Him.

The Extent of the Spiritual Blessings

- Paul says, “every spiritual blessing” (Eph 1:3).
 - There is no blessing that could be had that is withheld from the one who is united to Christ.
- Paul enumerates a sampling of some of these blessings in verses 4–14.
 - He describes election, sanctification, and holiness in verse 4
 - In verse 5, we see that in love, “he predestined us for adoption to himself as sons through Jesus Christ.” Predestination and election speak to his sovereign power to save the sinner and, as is mentioned, make them his holy and blameless child.
 - The sinner, who was once at enmity to God, has now amazingly been made his child.
 - In the beloved, Jesus, he has blessed us with his “glorious grace” (1:6).
 - In verse 7, Redemption and forgiveness
 - God has further “lavished upon us” the “riches of his grace” and made known to us the “mystery of his will” (Eph 1:7–9).

- The blessings continue in verse 11: “In him we have obtained an inheritance.” The Christian has already obtained an inheritance that will one day be fully realized.
- Finally, he tops this off in verse 13 with the Holy Spirit
- The believer receives all this through their union with Christ and is also given the Spirit of Christ to indwell him. Believers are in him, and he is in believers.
- This list is extensive and is amazing, but it is in no way exhaustive.
 - Whatever other spiritual blessing the Christian enjoys or could possibly enjoy is theirs in Christ.
 - God has lavished the riches of his grace upon us (Eph 1:7–8).
 - The “riches of his grace” seems to be another way of speaking of the spiritual blessings that flow from our union or one such blessing that encompasses a range of other blessings.
- What is remarkable is the language that Paul uses of God lavishing the riches of His grace upon those united to Christ.
 - This is all an expression of God’s love for his people (1:4).
 - God’s love overflows to the Christian in this abundance of spiritual blessing because they are in the Son.

The Source of the Spiritual Blessings

- The source of all these blessings for the believer is their union with Christ who possesses all these blessings.
- Union with Christ is not a passing reference but is at the very heart of what Paul is communicating and the source of every blessing he describes.
 - The overarching reference in verse 3
 - “he chose us in him” (4),
 - “he predestined us for adoption to himself as sons through Jesus Christ” (5),
 - “he has blessed us in the Beloved” (6),
 - “we have redemption through his blood” (7),
 - “according to his purpose, which he set forth in Christ” (9), and
 - “to unite all things in him” (10).
 - Our union to Jesus is the source of every blessing we enjoy.

- Charles Hodge explains, “Much in the same sense the Israelites are said to have been chosen in Abraham. Their relation to Abraham and God’s covenant with him, were the ground and reason of all the peculiar blessings they enjoyed. So our covenant union with Christ is the ground of all the benefits which we as the people of God possess or hope for.”¹
- Romans 8:32 says, “He who did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all, how will he not also with him graciously give us all things?”
 - God has already given believers the greater blessing, his Son.
 - He will not withhold the lesser blessing, everything else.
- These blessings are lavished on the believer in love (4).
 - Given the sinful state of man, this seems to be almost impossible.
 - Bryan Chapell says, “God loves us because we are in union with the Son that he loves. United to Christ, we are also adopted by the Father, and as such have all the rights, privileges, and affection that the Son of God himself receives from God”²
 - The love flows to the believer because they are united to the Son who knows the fullness of the Father’s love.

Application -

- Because of Christ, no spiritual blessing is withheld from the Christian.
 - God has blessed his people with these blessings in Christ.
 - Union with Christ is the source of all spiritual blessings the believer will ever enjoy.
- Union with Christ means that what is said of Christ can now be said of his people.
 - These blessings that now belong to the Christian cannot be taken away.
 - They are not conditioned on the believer at all.
 - Rather, they belong to the believer because they belong to the Son to whom they have been united.
- This truth should be a source of great comfort for the believer.
 - Who you are as a person and how God views you is determined by how God views Jesus.

¹ Hodge, *Commentary on the Epistle to the Ephesians*, 30.

² Chapell, *Ephesians*, 25.

- Your past sin and experiences, as well as current circumstances, cannot remove these blessings which have been given to you.
- This, of course, does not mean that you will always experience these blessings to the same degree.
- Do not separate Christ from the blessings that we have in Christ.
 - We can often speak of these blessings abstractly with no real reference to Christ.
 - We do not come to Christ to receive blessings.
 - We come to Christ for Christ.
 - The consummation of all these blessings will come when we enter into the presence of the one to whom we have been united.
 - To be with the one we love and the one who loves us.

For Reflection:

- Key verse: Ephesians 1:3, “Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places.”
- Do you ever struggle with feelings of inadequacy before God or other people? What are some areas in which you struggle with inadequacy? How does your union with Christ address these concerns?
- What are some of the implications in your life of the truth that in Christ you possess every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places?
- How do you respond to the truth that because of Christ, no spiritual blessing is withheld from you?

- Do you believe that union with Christ means that what is said of Christ can now be said of you? If so, how does that change how you live?

- What are some of the things in your life that you hope this study will help with?

Lesson 2
Galatians 3:28
Identity Problems

Main Point:

A proper understanding of union with Christ is essential for the Christian to rightly understand his identity and address the various misunderstandings of self and identity.

Introduction -

- How do you answer the question - who are you?
- What is identity, and what makes Christian identity distinct from a general conception of identity?
 - One way to understand identity is as a person's reflexive understanding of who they are, how they relate to the world around them, and their purpose for existing.
- This meaning of identity, while helpful, is not without its weaknesses.
 - It is subjective and
 - It may be incongruent with reality.
- Incongruent with reality.
 - Phrase, "I identify as" has become very common.
 - I recently met a camp counselor from Virginia who identifies as being from Ohio.
 - A person may identify, contrary to their social surroundings, as an animal, say, a goat or a dog.³
 - Their understanding of their "self" to be an animal does not make it a reality.
 - More commonly in society, it is a man identifying as a woman or a woman identifying as a man.
 - In these instances, their identity is inconsistent with reality.

³ Gelten, "Why This Man Decided to Become a Goat"; Thwaites, *GoatMan*; "The Transgender Man Who Identifies as a Dog | Daily Mail Online," accessed June 27, 2022, <https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-6269051/My-partner-dog-transgender-man-identifies-canine.html>.

- Community or Social consensus does not define reality.
- Belonging to a transgender community does not make biological gender fluid.
- These examples are more extreme, but most people live with many inconsistencies between their identity and reality.
- Some of these will be addressed in the next section.

Identity through experience

- Introduction
 - Powlison says, “Wrong ways of defining who we are arise naturally in our hearts, and the world around us preaches and models innumerable false identities.”⁴
 - To some extent, everyone understands and interprets their identity through their experiences.
 - Experiences ultimately lack what is needed to truly understand identity.
- Identity Shaped by What a Person Does (Active)
 - Many believe their identity is synonymous with their title or job description. They are a list of positions and accomplishments.
 - If identity is wrapped up in position, then identity must necessarily change when position changes.
 - A loss of position can mean a loss of that identity.
 - CEO, Pastor, downsized worker, etc.
 - These things are temporary, constantly changing, and have little lasting value in shaping one’s identity.
 - How will death change these things?
 - What is your eternal identity?
 - One’s spiritual endeavors and actions can shape how one defines their identity.
 - What happens when they fail in something or sin in some grievous way?
 - Spiritual disciplines are good but, they do not determine how God views or understands a man to be godly.
 - The experiences that people view as shaping their identity are vast and varied. Powlison gives some further examples:

⁴ Powlison, “A Man’s Identity,” 78.

- “You might identify yourself by your lineage or ethnicity, by your job history or the schools you attended, by your marital status or parental role. Perhaps you define who you are by your political leanings or the objects of your sexual longings. Maybe you consider yourself to be summed up in a Meyers-Briggs category or a psychiatric diagnosis. Your sense of self might be based on money (or lack of), on achievements (or failures) ...on your self-esteem (or self-hatred). Perhaps you think that your sins define you: an angry man, an addict, an anxious people-pleaser.”⁵
 - These things are temporary and fleeting, and do not offer an unchanging and ultimate understanding of who they are.
 - Identity Shaped by What is Done to a Person (Passive)
 - This is also temporary and fleeting but it has the added disadvantage of being further removed from a true identity.
 - While the experiences may be true, people can still develop a false understanding of their identity based on actual objective experiences.
 - One of the clearest examples of things done to a person affecting their identity is that of abuse.
 - People who have suffered abuse often wrongly assume they are worthless because of what they have experienced.
 - They are often left feeling ashamed and believing something is wrong with them.
 - Some have endured years of verbal abuse.
 - If someone tells someone that they are disgusting and unclean for long enough, they begin to believe the lie.
 - Those descriptions become a part of who they are and how they define their identity.
 - Someone telling a person they are worthless, disgusting, or unclean in no way makes these things true.
 - A person can view themselves through the perceived or real afflictions that they have suffered in their life.
 - There is also cultural identity when a group shares an identity through common experiences or interests.
 - One may be a part of a gang, a country club, a particular ethnicity, a knitting group, a bowling league, the LBGTQ+ community, or a political party.
 - Positively, a cultural identity makes people feel like they belong and can provide a sense of security.

⁵ Powlison, 78.

- Negatively, it may reflect seeking identity through the approval of others, and the interests and beliefs of the group may be different from personal opinions.
- All experiences, including the things done to a person by others, profoundly impact how they view themselves.
 - Yet, Jonathan Cruse rightly notes, “These are things that are not wrong in and of themselves but when given such ultimate prominence in our lives, the result has been disastrous.”⁶
 - A person looking at their experiences is looking at things horizontally, things in the creation to give them their identity.
 - People need something more concrete, objective, and lasting to define who they are.

Identity through feelings⁷

- Recently, there has been a shift away from identity being determined by external realities and experiences.
 - External realities have been replaced with internal feelings and beliefs (the inner life).
 - This means that identity is now invented rather than discovered.
 - The identity one creates for oneself may be incongruent with reality and truth.
 - What one believes or feels has become more real, authentic, genuine, or true than reality and truth itself.
 - This modern shift has made one’s identity fluid and rapidly changing depending on what one feels or believes at any given time.
 - This is a further step away from a proper understanding of identity than the abovementioned experiences.
 - Understanding identity through feelings is harmful and detrimental to developing a true Christian identity as it is a movement away from external truth and reality itself.
- An Internal and Relative Shift
 - Rather than seeing the world as possessing a given meaning and order we must understand and conform to, today many view the world as

⁶ Cruse, *The Christian’s True Identity: What It Means to Be in Christ*, 5.

⁷ I am indebted to Carl R. Trueman, *The Rise and Triumph of the Modern Self: Cultural Amnesia, Expressive Individualism, and the Road to Sexual Revolution* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2020) for much on identity in the remainder of this lesson.

something without meaning and purpose and thus one is free to create these.

- Objective truth has been sacrificed to the subjective will or feelings of the individual.
- This shift in the understanding of identity is partly the outworking of postmodernism's attack on absolute truth.
 - In the absence of absolute truth, people are free to invent it for themselves.
 - Romans 1:18 talks about men suppressing the truth of God in unrighteousness.
 - Powlison explains, "Your instinctive sense of identity is skewed. In the act of suppressing the knowledge of God, a fallen heart suppresses true self-knowing. Whenever we forget God, we forget who we are."⁸
- Feelings have taken the place of reality and, for many, determine what they believe to be reality.
- This way of understanding identity is self-centered and completely subjective. At any moment, a person is free to redefine or reinvent that identity.
- This has become more apparent through social media and the growing disconnection between people and their online identities.
 - People can invent who they are and put themselves on show to receive the approval, the likes, of their "friends."
 - Only the best pictures get on to a person's page, and then only after a bit of editing and manipulation.
 - As Brad Paisley jokingly opined in a song, "I'm so much cooler online."⁹
- This relative shift in understanding a person's ever-changing identity through their feelings unknowingly leaves people in a place of insecurity and confusion as they contemplate their identity.

Gender Identity

- The relative shift in our understanding of identity is nowhere more evident than in the realm of gender identity.

⁸ Powlison, "A Man's Identity," 79.

⁹ Paisley, "Online."

- There was a time when the modern expression “I am a woman trapped in a man’s body” would have been disregarded because of its blatant denial of reality.
- When reality itself becomes relative, then anything goes.
- Society has normalized homosexuality, pornography, and sex outside marriage.
 - American culture views the issues not foremost about behavior but about identity.
 - Opposition to such behaviors is seen by some as oppressive and a denial of a person’s expression of individuality and the inner psychological happiness they desperately seek.
 - An inner sense of well-being has become so important that those outside a person must affirm their understanding of identity.
 - Rather than conforming their identity to external principles, people expect outside entities to conform to their inner beliefs.
 - Failure for them to do so is an attack on a person’s well-being and, to many, is more severe and damaging than a physical attack.
 - This means that it is not enough that a person’s homosexuality or counter-biological belief about their gender be tolerated in society; it must now be affirmed.
 - To tell a man he cannot compete as a female in college or Olympic sports is offensive and a denial of his identity.
- Christians should not be surprised at this identity shift.
 - Powlison explains that this happens when “your sense of identity comes unglued from the God who actually defines you.”¹⁰

Identity through Union

- Identity has been understood with the wrong foundation.
 - People have looked increasingly at themselves, their experiences, and even their feelings to determine their understanding of identity.
- To understand identity correctly, one must begin with God and his Word as the foundation.
 - As the creator, God defines and gives objective meaning to identity.
 - This is outside of a person’s inner subjective psychological understanding.
- For the Christian, this identity is tied to their union with Christ.

¹⁰ Powlison, “A Man’s Identity,” 78.

- A proper understanding of union with Christ is essential for Christians to rightly understand their identity and address the misunderstandings of self and identity presented by culture.
- A correct understanding of identity begins with God as the foundation and is thoroughly God-centered.
- The problem of identity goes much deeper than a person's job or family; it is foremost a spiritual issue.
- Union with Christ enables the Christian to say with Paul, "It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me" (Gal 2:20).
- In Christ, the image of God in man is restored. Christians are being conformed to the image of the Son.
- This means that human purpose is restored and further established.
- Identity is not relative, subjective, or meaningless; it is utterly God-centered.
- John Piper says: "Christian selfhood is not defined in terms of who we are in and of ourselves. It's defined in terms of what God does to us and the relationship he creates with us and the destiny he appoints for us. In other words as a Christian you cannot talk about your identity without talking about the action of God on you, the relationship of God with you, and the purpose of God for you. The biblical understanding of human self-identity is radically God-centered."¹¹
- Identity is not invented by us it is given by God.
- Union with Christ removes the subjectivity of understanding identity and the insecurity of such an approach.
 - Sinnett writes, "*in Christ*, we do not have to wonder what God thinks of us...we do not have to wonder what his intentions are toward us...we don't have to wonder who we are any more. God declares who we are, *in Christ*."¹²
 - Union with Christ means the Christian is accepted in the beloved and an honored child of God the Father.
 - God publicly declares their value, worth, and even their glory.¹³
 - This not only defines who they now are but also deals with the lingering issues of shame and rejection.
 - All the blessings that belong to Jesus are ours solely because of our union with him.

¹¹ Piper, "Christian Identity and Christian Destiny."

¹² Sinnett, "A Theology of Union: What It Means to Belong to God, In Christ, and Its Application," 84.

¹³ Welch, *Shame Interrupted: How God Lifts the Pain of Worthlessness and Rejection*, 4.

- Apart from past failures and sins done by a person or done to a person, in Christ, the Christian is loved by the Father with the very same love he has for his Son.
- Union with Christ offers medicine to the suffering soul.
- Union with Christ does not undo past experiences such as abuse.
 - Still, it does help to address the false understandings of shame, guilt, and rejection that often accompany abuse victims.
 - One needs to understand that what they experienced or even how they feel about it does not define them; rather, God does in Christ.
 - Positive and negative experiences are not magically removed from a person when they understand their union with Christ; instead, union profoundly transforms their understanding of these things.
 - Cruse writes, “To have an identity that is rooted in Christ will claim, cleanse, and control all other aspects of who we are. And identity in Christ will give renewed meaning, invigorating purpose, and God-glorifying direction to everything else we do in life.”¹⁴
 - Union with Christ addresses shame by assuring Christians of their position in Christ and how God the Father views them.
 - Edward Fisher, in *The Marrow of Modern Divinity*, describes union with Christ as a “special, spiritual, and real union... Whence it must needs follow that you cannot be condemned, except Christ be condemned with you; neither can Christ be saved, except you be saved with him And as by means of corporeal marriage all things become common betwixt man. and wife; even so, by means of this spiritual marriage, all things become common betwixt Christ and you; for when Christ hath married his spouse unto himself, he passeth over all his estate unto her; so that whatsoever Christ is or hath, you may boldly challenge as your own.”¹⁵
 - Though a person may have faced or may yet face the condemnation of other men, they can know that in Christ, God will never condemn them.
- In Christ, our old self, with all its shame and self-condemnation, is put to death.
 - Galatians 2:20, “I have been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me.”
 - Though Paul affirms, “It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me,” Paul and has not ceased to exist.
- Those objective realities and experiences discussed above are still there and shape Paul somehow, but something greater has substantially changed him.

¹⁴ Cruse, *The Christian’s True Identity: What It Means to Be in Christ*, 12–13.

¹⁵ Fisher, *The Marrow of Modern Divinity*, 166.

- Union with Christ has changed “his most basic sense of *who* he is, of the person that inhabits the space occupied by his body, of who gets the credit for what his limbs and lips do, of who he is becoming. He is not becoming a better version of Paul; he is becoming Paul-in-Christ.”¹⁶
- Union with Christ addresses the issues of gender and race.
 - Paul writes in Galatians 3:28, “There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is no male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.”
 - Paul is not arguing that union with Christ does away with these distinctions in the way society has described gender as fluid or non-existent.
 - Union with Christ points us to a greater reality than these issues without doing away with gender or race.
 - The unity that the world seeks over such matters is found as people are united to Christ by faith and become one in him.
 - This gives the Church an excellent platform to model love and unity in Christ for people who are different from them out of the foundation of their union with Christ and thus their corporate unity.
- Union with Christ, therefore, changes the Christian’s community identity.
 - Beyond race or gender, those who are united to Christ, the Church, are one family that is identified foremost by being in Christ.
 - Distinctions in gender and race are not dissolved; rather, they are glorified and shown to be beautiful in Christ.
- The Church is increasingly talking about identity but not in relation to union with Christ.
 - The Church has identified the problem but largely failed to point to the person of Jesus Christ as the solution.
 - If more emphasis were placed on union with Christ, many Christians would not be deceived by the faulty logic and misunderstanding of identity set forth by the culture in which they live.

Application -

- Subjectivity and incongruity with reality are addressed by a Christian identity that is deeper and more objective.
 - Christian identity is an absolute objective reality defining one’s existence and purpose; it is who God says a person is, even when this may seem incongruous with one’s self-identity.

¹⁶ Macaskill, *Living in Union with Christ: Paul’s Gospel and Christian Moral Identity*, ix.

- Ideally, a person’s self-identity and Christian identity would be identical, but this is often not the case.
- Union with Christ offers a solid foundation for facing the inevitable end to the things in life that one believes to shape one’s identity profoundly.
 - Powlison writes, “all your temporary callings come to an end. When you grow old, frail, and helpless, you will become someone else’s charge and responsibility. But your true identity is imperishable. You will still abide in Christ. And when he appears, you will appear with him in glory.”¹⁷
 - Relative and individual expressions of identity based on feelings are in constant flux.
 - Only in Christ does the Christian have an unchanging and eternal identity as the foundation of their existence.
- If identity is to be understood rightly, a person cannot look at the horizontal plane of his experiences, the actions of others, or even his beliefs about himself; he must look up to God.
- The Bible reveals that the Christian’s union with Christ defines their identity.
- Only through union with Christ can a person understand their true Christian or in-Christ identity.

For Reflection:

- Key verse: Galatians 3:28, “There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is no male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.”
- Key Definition: Christian identity - an absolute objective reality defining one’s existence and purpose; it is who God says a person is, even when this may seem incongruous with one’s self-identity.
- How would you define your identity apart from Christ? Who are you?

¹⁷ Powlison, “A Man’s Identity,” 82.

- What are some ways you have misunderstood who you are?
- Who are you in Christ?
- How does this address issues such as shame and self-loathing?

Lesson 3
John 15:1-11
Abiding in Christ

Main Point:

Believers are to abide in union with Christ by living out of that union and
treasuring it above all else.

Introduction -

- John commonly uses “abide in me (Jesus)” to express union with Christ instead of “in Christ.”
- In John 15:4 Jesus gives the imperative for the Christian to “abide in me.”
 - Later he tells us to abide or remain in the words of Jesus (7), his love (9-10), and keeping Jesus’ commandments (10).
 - This is a loving invitation to enjoy and rest in him and his provision.
- The Vine
 - The vine must be understood as referring to Israel who was frequently spoken of as a vine in the Old Testament (cf. Hos 10:1–2; Is 5:1–7, 27:2–6; Jer 2:21; Ezek 15:1–5, 17:1–21, 19:10–15; Ps 80:8–19).
 - Interestingly, those Old Testament occurrences are always negative.
 - Jesus is presenting himself as the true vine and the fulfillment of Israel’s calling.
 - He is successful precisely where Old Testament Israel failed.
 - His disciples are branches who become participants in the New Israel through their union to Him which is expressed in the terminology of abiding in this passage.
- Abiding
 - Jesus is specifically inviting his followers to abide in Him.
 - The exact meaning of abiding/remaining can be difficult to comprehend from the passage.
 - It entails interpersonal communion with Him.

- Every believer is united to Christ in salvation. Abiding is more than simple belief or continuing to believe in Jesus.
- Abiding in Jesus is living out of the union in a spiritually productive way.
 - Abide in Christ and His love.
 - Live out of this truth.
 - Imagine having superpowers: Would knowing that you were Captain America affect how you live?
 - How would your life change?
 - How does knowing that you are united to Christ change your life?
 - You must believe and trust that Jesus is everything we need.

Fruitless Branches

- Jesus speaks of two types of branches: those that bear fruit and those that do not bear fruit.
- The fruitless branches are removed from the vine, thrown away, and ultimately thrown into the fire (hell).
- Jesus is speaking of unbelievers when he refers to “every branch in me that does not bear fruit” (15:2).
 - John is clear elsewhere that Christians cannot be separated from Christ or lose their salvation.
 - John 10:28-29, “I give them eternal life, and they will never perish, and no one will snatch them out of my hand. My Father, who has given them to me, is greater than all, and no one is able to snatch them out of the Father's hand.” (see also 1 John 2:19)
 - A lack of fruit proves the person was never united to Christ. (John 15:8)
 - The reason given for why these branches bear no fruit is seen in verse 5. These fruitless branches are apart from Christ, they do not have union with Him, and are thus incapable of bearing fruit for the kingdom.

Fruitful Branches

- What causes some to bear much fruit and others none (5).
 - The distinguishing factor is union with Christ and specifically abiding in that union.
 - Fruitfulness in the Christian life depends on union with Christ.

- The Christian can share in the fruitfulness of Christ through union to Him and can himself bear fruit through Christ as he abides in that relationship.
 - That relationship to Christ is of the utmost importance for the Christian.
 - Abiding and bearing fruit presume an ongoing reality and not a simple one-time occurrence.
 - Christians who have been united to Christ in salvation are to nurture that relationship and live out of it that they may bear much fruit for the kingdom.
 - Christ, who is the vine, continues to nurture the believer and cause him to produce fruit.
- Abiding in Christ's love (John 15:9–10)
 - John clarifies the meaning of abiding in Christ by speaking of abiding in Christ's love: "As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you. Abide in my love. If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love, just as I have kept my Father's commandments and abide in his love." (9–10)
 - Christians are encouraged to live their lives always mindful of the love of Christ for them. They are to live out of that love.
 - One expression of that is keeping Jesus' commandments.
 - Christians who abide in his love understand that His commandments are given in love for their good, and their obedience is an expression of their love for Him.
 - Jesus extends this further to loving others as he has loved them (12ff)
- Abiding in Christ and his love produces joy (John 15:11)
 - One reason for this joy is that the believer united to Christ is a sharer in and recipient of the Father's love for the Son.
 - Ridderbos writes, "To remain in Jesus' love is at the same time to share in his joy, a joy Jesus finds in being loved and sent by the Father and in carrying out the Father's commandments."¹⁸
 - The human search for joy is answered in the believer's union with Christ.
 - It is experienced to greater and lesser degrees in this life, at least somewhat dependent on the believer's extent of abiding in Christ.

¹⁸ Ridderbos, *The Gospel of John: A Theological Commentary*, 519.

- One day, that joy will be full, when Christ returns and believers dwell with Him forever. Psalm 16:11 reads, “In your presence there is fullness of joy; at your right hand are pleasures forevermore.”
- Jesus is saying that the truest and really the only experience of this reality is through union with Him and abiding in that union.
- Through union and abiding, Christ is present with the believer and the believer knows joy and pleasure now and forevermore.

Treasuring – Philippians 3:1–11

- Union with Christ should be highly prized and the source of great joy in the life of the Christian.
- Paul is an excellent example of this perspective and shows Christians the importance they should place on their union with Christ.
- The passage begins with a calling and reminder to “rejoice in the Lord” (3:1)
- He will go on to express the foundation and motivation for his rejoicing in the Lord.
- Christians are warned to put no confidence in the flesh. (Phil 3:3)
- Confidence in the flesh was Paul’s former boast.
- Paul shows the reason he has to put confidence in the flesh, by recounting his former glory in the life he lived before he was a Christian.
 - It is important to understand that Paul is not listing things that are bad, but rather what should be understood as good, especially from the perspective of the false teachers (2) and those who are unbelievers.
 - Many of these things he lists are great achievements that any religious man would be glad to boast in.
- No one earns status with God by these things, not even Paul.
 - These works are the wrong currency, like using Monopoly money at a real store. You may believe yourself to be rich, but all that Monopoly gains you nothing.
 - Though these things that Paul lists are not inherently bad,¹⁹ if they interfere with one coming to Christ then they are bad.

¹⁹ The one that stands out as inherently bad is his statement “as to zeal, a persecutor of the church.” At the time he believed the church to be in opposition to God, which is why he cites this as an example of religious zeal or zeal for God. If one were to think of this from a Christian perspective as opposition to false religion driven by a zeal for Christ, it might be closer to the positive aspect Paul is

- If they in any way become a ground for self-righteousness, then they can hinder one from faith in Christ and dependence on his righteousness.
- For that reason, even good religious things can be counted as a “loss for the sake of Christ.” (7)
- In verse 8, Paul goes even further. There is nothing “religious” that can be done by Paul or anyone else that compares to knowing Christ.
- None of those things can save the sinner or impart the blessings that the Christian receives through Christ.
- The superiority of union with Christ
 - Union with Christ is far superior to the religious acts in which he previously hoped.
 - In verses 7 and 8, he speaks of counting his prior gain as loss “for the sake of Christ” and “because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord.”
 - At the end of verse 8 and into verse 9 he says, “In order that I may gain Christ and be found in him.”
 - Paul’s chief delight and glory is gaining Christ which is directly connected with being found in him.
 - To gain Christ (3:8), to be found in him (3:9), and to know him (3:10) are various ways of Paul communicating union with Christ and participation in him.
 - Being found in Christ means to remove all pretense of self-reliance and to receive from the judge, not what you have earned, but what has been given to Christ and is rightly his.
- Rejoicing in Suffering (10–11)
 - In 2 Corinthians 11:30 Paul writes, “If I must boast, I will boast of the things that show my weakness.”
 - He is not concerned with all the temporal accomplishments that so many other people see as defining them and being the foundation of their boasting.
 - He prefers rather to boast about his weakness.

communicating.

- He said earlier in the same letter, “But we have this treasure in jars of clay, to show that the surpassing power belongs to God and not to us” (2 Cor 4:7).
- In 2 Corinthians 12:9, Paul explains that the Lord said to him, “My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.”
- Union with Christ has changed Paul’s values and his very identity.
 - What others view as shameful and is, unquestionably, suffering becomes a ground of boasting.
 - Suffering is good because it maximizes Paul’s dependence on Christ through that union and makes Jesus’ strength and power manifest to Paul and to others who see Paul.
 - It causes Paul to look for his identity not in himself, but in his union to his Savior.
- Paul’s values have changed. His boast is now in Christ and in him alone.
 - Nothing else in this world can compare to being found in Christ.
 - Mark 8:35–37: “For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake and the gospel’s will save it. For what does it profit a man to gain the whole world and forfeit his soul? For what can a man give in return for his soul?”
 - See also Colossians 3:1–17.

Application -

- There is nothing that anyone, not even Paul, can accomplish or possess that will compare to union with Christ.
 - Paul will therefore encourage the Corinthian church by saying, “We look not to the things that are seen but to the things that are unseen. For the things that are seen are transient, but the things that are unseen are eternal” (2 Cor 4:18).
 - Union with Christ is of a greater and eternally lasting value compared to anything else.
- Believers need to abide in Christ and that union for their experience and delight in these blessings and in Christ Himself.
- Sometimes we do not access through all the means of grace what Christ has already secured for us.

- Believers abide in union with Christ by living out of that union and treasuring it above all else.

For Reflection:

- Key verses: John 15:4-5, “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.”
- What does it mean to abide in Christ?
- What are some areas in which you can grow in abiding in Christ?
- What are some things in your heart which compete with Christ to be treasured?
- How can abiding in Christ shape your identity?

Lesson 4
2 Corinthians 5:14-17
New Creation in Him

Main Point:

The believer is a new person through his union with Christ

Introduction -

- Review
 - Lesson 1 –
 - Every Spiritual Blessing
 - Union with Christ is the source of every spiritual blessing the Christian enjoys.
 - Lesson 2 –
 - Identity Problems
 - A proper understanding of union with Christ is essential for Christians to rightly understand their identity and address the various misunderstandings of self and identity.
 - Lesson 3 –
 - Abiding in Christ
 - Believers are to abide in union with Christ by living out of that union and treasuring it above all else.
- Identity: People are creatures made in the image of God to glorify him and enjoy him forever.
 - Sin distorts the image of God in us and hinders our ability to glorify God and enjoy him.
 - Because of sin, we cannot get along with God – Relationship problem.
- Jesus came to rescue us and reconcile us to God. He came to restore that relationship.
- Christians, those who trust in Jesus, are united to Him.
- What about our past sins and our fallen nature?
- In this lesson we see that we are made new in Christ.

The Old

- The old has passed away or died – It is done away with and gone.
- That which separated us from God has been dealt with. Psalm 103:12 says our sins are cast as far as the east is from the west.
- Christians are changed and are no longer what they were before Christ.
 - The old thinking is gone.
 - The old behaviors are gone.
 - The dominion of Satan and death has ended.
 - Romans 8:2, “For the law of the Spirit of life has set you free in Christ Jesus from the law of sin and death.”
 - Romans 7:4, “Likewise, my brothers, you also have died to the law through the body of Christ, so that you may belong to another, to him who has been raised from the dead, in order that we may bear fruit for God.”
- Your identity has changed
 - You are no longer judged by God based on your past sins and failings.
 - You are no longer under the headship of Adam.

The New

- Salvation is a re-creation in Christ.
 - The creation language points back to Gen. 1, where we were made in the image of God
 - Now, we are re-created a new in the image of God – united to Christ.
 - Romans 8:29, those whom he saved he determined “to be conformed to the image of his Son, in order that (Jesus) might be the firstborn among many brothers.”
 - Marcus Peter Johnson writes, “To be in Christ is to have a newness of life founded in him...Our new life, our holiness and sanctification, and our good works are all bound up with our being ‘in Christ.’ It is no wonder, then, that Paul can write that God has predestined us ‘to be conformed to the image of his son’ (Rom 8:29).”
 - Eph. 2:10–13, “For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them. Therefore remember that at one time you Gentiles in the flesh,

called “the uncircumcision” by what is called the circumcision, which is made in the flesh by hands— remember that you were at that time separated from Christ, alienated from the commonwealth of Israel and strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world. But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ.”

- Those who are in Christ have been transformed from what they once were into something completely new.
- Previously we followed the world, flesh, and devil.
- Now, we glorify God with good works.
- A new heart and a new nature.
 - Colossians 2:12, “having been buried with him in baptism, in which you were also raised with him through faith in the powerful working of God, who raised him from the dead.”
 - Romans 6:3–10, “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.”
- We have a renewed knowledge - Colossians 3:10, "and have put on the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge after the image of its creator."
- We have righteousness and holiness
 - Ephesians 4:24, "and to put on the new self, created after the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness."
 - 1 Corinthians 1:2, “To the church of God that is in Corinth, to those sanctified in Christ Jesus”

- We have Christ living in us. Galatians 2:20, “I have been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me.”
- We have the indwelling of the Spirit
 - 1 John 3:24, “Whoever keeps his commandments abides in God, and God in him. And by this we know that he abides in us, by the Spirit whom he has given us.”
 - 1 John 4:13, “By this we know that we abide in him and he in us, because he has given us of his Spirit.”

Application -

- Put off old and put on new:
 - Eph. 4:22-24, “put off your old self, which belongs to your former manner of life and is corrupt through deceitful desires, and to be renewed in the spirit of your minds, and to put on the new self, created after the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness.”
 - Eph. 5:8, “for at one time you were darkness, but now you are light in the Lord. Walk as children of light”
- Christians are not judged by their past, present, or future sins.
 - Now, we are judged by God based on the merit and life of his Son, Jesus.
 - He lived a perfect life, always doing the will of the Father and glorifying him.
 - This changes how we view others – “From now on, therefore, we regard no one according to the flesh.” (2 Cor. 5:16)
- This is transformative to our nature and our understanding.
 - We are truly new, though not fully new yet.
 - It changes our relationship to sin – “How can we who died to sin still live in it?...Let not sin therefore reign in your mortal body, to make you obey its passions. Do not present your members to sin as instruments for unrighteousness, but present yourselves to God as those who have been brought from death to life, and your members to God as instruments for righteousness. For sin will have no dominion over you, since you are not under law but under grace.” (Rom 6:2, 12–14)
 - You must learn how to live according to this new reality.

- You are not to live according to the past but what the Bible says of your new life.

For Reflection:

- Key verses: 2 Corinthians 5:17, “Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come.”
- What about your past haunts you today?
- How has this affected your life?
- How does being a new creation in Christ help to address these things?
- What does abiding in Christ look like in relation to being a new creation? How do you live out of this truth?
- Joel Beeke, “Ask: What do I think? What do I feel? What do I know?”²⁰

²⁰ See Appendix 5.

Lesson 5

2 Corinthians 5:21

Made Righteous in Him

Main Point:

Union with Christ means that the righteousness of Christ belongs to the believer so that God the Father sees the believer as righteous, just as Jesus is righteous.

Introduction -

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 - Lesson 4
 - New Creation
 - The believer is a new person through his union with Christ.
- Have you ever done something that hurt someone you love?
 - Did you ask for forgiveness? Did they forgive you?

- Do you always forgive others for the things they do to you?
 - What if God treated us the same way we have, at times, treated others?
- This lesson will consider the true forgiveness we receive from God through Christ.
 - In Christ, we are justified or declared to be righteous.
 - Not just sinless, but perfectly good.
 - We have seen that we are not righteous, we have sinned against God.
 - How can he call us righteous?

Christ knew no sin

- He knew what it was; he just never did it.
 - 1 John 3:5, “You know that he appeared to take away sins, and in him there is no sin.”
 - 1 Peter 2:22–23. "He committed no sin, neither was deceit found in his mouth. When he was reviled, he did not revile in return; when he suffered, he did not threaten, but continued entrusting himself to him who judges justly."
 - Jesus never sinned even in thought – he was perfect & holy.
- He made him to be sin on our behalf
 - 1 Peter 2:24, “He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree, that we might die to sin and live to righteousness. By his wounds you have been healed.”
 - Isaiah 53:4–5, “Surely he has borne our griefs and carried our sorrows; yet we esteemed him stricken, smitten by God, and afflicted. But he was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was upon him, and by his wounds we are healed.”
 - He was our substitute so that he received what we rightly deserved.
- Jesus became so closely identified with sin that it even says that God made Him to be sin.
 - Yet, He did not become a sinner. He was the sin-bearer.
 - He bore the curse of sin without being personally defiled by it.
- The only way that we can have our sins removed is by Jesus taking those sins upon Himself on our behalf.

We Became Righteous

- God did not (just) remove our sin and place us in an innocent state like Adam and Eve before the fall, but He made us righteous in Christ.
 - This does not mean we will perfectly obey.
 - We still sin and would fall just like Adam.
- We need to be perfect to stand in the presence of God.
 - When God looks on us, that is exactly what He sees.
 - Christ's perfect righteousness counted as ours - "the righteousness of God."
- Since we could not perfectly obey Christ, he had to live a life of perfect obedience to God to earn righteousness for us.
 - It was by his obedience that we are made righteous.
 - Romans 5:19 says, "For as by one man's disobedience many were made sinners, so by one man's obedience many will be made righteous."
 - Jesus offers the Father his perfect obedience for all who are in him.
 - Adam failed in his obedience; Christ succeeded perfectly.
 - Adam was the source of sin and death. Christ was the source of obedience and life.
- Jesus became sin for us, and through our connection or union with him by faith, we become the "righteousness of God."
 - What was lost in the Fall; the relationship of love, communication, and purpose, is restored in Christ.
 - It changes not just our account but our identity.
 - This explains why we are called new creations in 2 Corinthians 5:17.
 - God considers Christians to be righteous because they are in Christ, who is righteous.
- We can only be righteous through faith in Jesus.
 - Philippians 3:9, "be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God that depends on faith."
 - Galatians 2:16, "we know that a person is not justified by works of the law but through faith in Jesus Christ, so we also have believed in Christ Jesus, in order to be justified by faith in Christ and not by works of the law, because by works of the law no one will be justified."

- It is a gift from God - Romans 3:24, “and are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus.”

Application

- Our identity in Christ
 - Union with Christ means that the righteousness of Christ is counted to the believer so that God the Father sees the believer as righteous, just as Jesus is righteous. (Phil 3:8–10)
 - Who we are and who Christ is.
 - 2 Corinthians 5:21 describes what is sometimes called the great exchange, as sinners exchange their sin for the righteousness of Christ.
 - Christians tend to think of this exchange simply in terms of their status.
 - Grant Macaskill points out that “What Jesus takes to the cross is who we are, our very selves with all their guilt, and what we enjoy in union with him is precisely who he is, his fullness with all its glory.”²¹
 - 1 Corinthians 1:30, “And because of him you are in Christ Jesus, who became to us wisdom from God, righteousness and sanctification and redemption.”
 - The believer is righteous because he is in Christ, not because of his actions.
 - The puritan Richard Sibbes wrote, “Often think with thyself, What am I? A poor sinful creature; but I have a righteousness in Christ that answers all. I am weak in myself, but Christ is strong, and I am strong in him. I am foolish in myself, but I am wise in him. What I want in myself I have in him. He is mine, and his righteousness is mine, which is the righteousness of God-man. Being clothed with this, I stand safe against conscience, hell, wrath, and whatsoever. Though I have daily experience of my sins, yet there is more righteousness in Christ, who is mine, and who is the chief of ten thousand, than there is sin in me.”²²

²¹ Macaskill, *Living in Union with Christ: Paul’s Gospel and Christian Moral Identity*, 39.

²² Michael Reeves, *Rejoicing in Christ* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2015), 69.

- Righteous fruit is an outworking of this union. Philippians 1:11, “filled with the fruit of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ, to the glory and praise of God.”
- We gain a reconciled relationship with God.
 - We previously saw how Adam’s sin impacted our relationship with God. Part of being made righteous is being reconciled to God.
 - What a glorious thought, that we who were dead in our sins and enemies of God are now alive in Christ and in a loving relationship with Him.
 - Romans 5:1, 9–11, “Therefore, since we have been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ... Since, therefore, we have now been justified by his blood, much more shall we be saved by him from the wrath of God. For if while we were enemies we were reconciled to God by the death of his Son, much more, now that we are reconciled, shall we be saved by his life. More than that, we also rejoice in God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have now received reconciliation.”
 - 2 Corinthians 5:18, “All this is from God, who through Christ reconciled us to himself and gave us the ministry of reconciliation”
 - Colossians 1:20, “and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, making peace by the blood of his cross.”
- Those who are united to Christ cannot be condemned.
 - Romans 8:1, “There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.”
 - Acts 13:39, “by him everyone who believes is freed from everything from which you could not be freed by the law of Moses.”

For Reflection:

- Key verse: 2 Corinthians 5:21, “For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.”

- What are some things for which you condemn yourself or feel condemned by others?
- How can you purposefully filter these things through your union with Christ?
- What does abiding in Christ look like in relation to being righteous in Him? How do you live out of this truth?
- How is God assuring you of your righteousness in Christ?
- Ask: What do I think? What do I feel? What do I know?

Lesson 6

Galatians 4:3–7

Adopted in Him

Main Point:

Union with Christ means that the believer is now a child of God.

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 - Lesson 4
 - New Creation
 - The believer is a new person through his union with Christ.
 - Lesson 5
 - Made Righteous
 - Union with Christ means that the righteousness of Christ belongs to the believer so that God the Father sees the believer as righteous, just as Jesus is righteous.
- Christians are loved by God. So much so that God sent His Son to die for us.
- Not just to save us but to make us a part of his family. (Gal 4:3–7)

Change in Identity

- Formerly slaves (Gal 4:7). To demonic powers. (Gal 4:4)
- He freed us and made us His children.
 - 1 John 3:1, “See what love the Father has given us, that we should be called children of God, and that is what we are.”
 - We call the almighty God, the God who is holy, holy, holy, our daddy. (Gal 4:6)
 - Ephesians 5:1 calls Christians “beloved children.”
- The Holy Spirit tells us we are Sons or proves that we are. (Gal 4:6)
 - Romans 8:14–16, “For all who are led by the Spirit of God are sons of God. For you did not receive the spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you have received the Spirit of adoption as sons, by whom we cry, “Abba! Father!” The Spirit himself bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God.”
- This adoption is “through” the Son or through our union with Christ.
 - Ephesians 1:4–6, “In love he predestined us for adoption to himself as sons through Jesus Christ, according to the purpose of his will, to the praise of his glorious grace, with which he has blessed us in the Beloved.”
 - Adoption through the Son leads to God being glorified for his grace (Eph 1:6)
 - Jesus is the Son, and we are united to him.
 - The Son shares with us his sonship.
 - Whatever is his, is also ours.
 - If we are united to God’s Son, how could we not be sons of God?
- This position carries with it great blessings.
 - Pastor Bryan Chapell says, “God loves us because we are in union with the Son that he loves. United to Christ, we are also adopted by the Father, and as such have all the rights, privileges, and affection that the Son of God himself receives from God.”²³
 - You are an heir of all that belongs to Jesus. (Gal 4:7b)
 - When Jesus teaches us to pray, he begins with “our Father...”

²³ Chapell, *Ephesians*, 25.

- Consider how a loving father receives the requests of his son.
- This encourages us to come with boldness to the throne of grace in the name of Jesus.
- We are loved by the Father - John 17:23, “I in them and you in me, that they may become perfectly one, so that the world may know that you sent me and loved them even as you loved me.”
- We are accepted by the Father.
- We have access to the Father.
 - The average persons does not have access to a president or a King but their child does.
 - Children wake up their parents at any time in the night and are received. They have access to mom and dad.
- We are protected by the Father. Being a child points to our dependence on our Father.

Application -

- Jesus came to enlarge God’s family and bring that family to heaven. Hebrews 2:10, “it was fitting that he, for whom and by whom all things exist, in bringing many sons to glory.”
- We should desire to be more like our Father.
 - David Powlison writes, “Who God is also correlates with how you express your core identity as your various roles in life develop. For example, “The Lord’s compassion for you is like a father with his children.” You will always be a dependent child at your core, but as you grow up into his image, you become increasingly able to care for others in a fatherly way.”²⁴
 - Powlison continues, “You develop into a good father by living as a well-fathered child of your Father.”²⁵
- Being a child of God through union with Christ, matters more than other things that might be used to define one’s identity.
 - Galatians 3:26–29, “in Christ Jesus you are all sons of God, through faith. For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is no male

²⁴ Powlison, “A Man’s Identity,” 79.

²⁵ Powlison, 81.

and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus. And if you are Christ's, then you are Abraham's offspring, heirs according to promise.”

- A restored relationship with God matters more than earthly relationships and distinctions.
- How can you be a child of God?
 - Only by faith in Jesus.
 - John 1:12, “But to all who did receive him, who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God.”
- How do we abide in our identity as a child of God in Christ?
 - Identity and purpose are restored for all who repent and put their hope in Christ.
 - Being God’s child is now the filter through which you interpret the world around you.
 - You can know that you are loved, cared for, and protected by your heavenly Father.

For Reflection:

- Key verse: Galatians 4:7, “So you are no longer a slave, but a son, and if a son, then an heir through God.”

- In what ways did your earthly father let you down? How are you comforted by the fact that God is a perfect father who never fails?

- What do you find most encouraging about being a child of God?

- How do you abide in the truth that you are a child of God in Christ?

- How does this truth address certain struggles in your life?

- Ask: What do I think? What do I feel? What do I know?

Lesson 7

1 Corinthians 1:2

Sanctified and Glorified in Him

Main Point:

In union with Christ, believers are sanctified, being sanctified, and one day will be glorified.

Introduction -

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 - Lesson 4
 - New Creation
 - The believer is a new person through his union with Christ.
 - Lesson 5
 - Made Righteous
 - Union with Christ means that the righteousness of Christ belongs to the believer so that God the Father sees the believer as righteous, just as Jesus is righteous.
 - Lessons 6
 - Adopted

- Union with Christ means that the believer is now a child of God.
- The problem of our condemnation in Adam God resolves through justification in Christ.
- The problem of our remaining corruption he remedies through sanctification by the Spirit.

Sanctified

- Sanctified means to make something holy or set it apart to God.
 - It means that there is a growth in holiness.
 - It means that there is a diminishing of sin.
- In Christ, Christians are sanctified. (1 Cor 1:2a)
 - 1 Corinthians 1:28-30, “God chose what is low and despised in the world, even things that are not, to bring to nothing things that are, so that no human being might boast in the presence of God. And because of him you are in Christ Jesus, who became to us wisdom from God, righteousness and sanctification and redemption.”
 - Chad VanDixhorn writes, “Like every Christian blessing and benefit, sanctification is found in union with Christ. Only by a willingness to identify with a Saviour who suffered will we find ourselves dead to sin, and only by looking with faith at Christ’s empty tomb do we find the resurrection power for which Paul prayed (Phil 3:10).”²⁶
 - 2 Corinthians 1:21, “And it is God who establishes us with you in Christ.”
- We are united to Christ and so we start looking more like Christ.
 - Romans 8:30, “For those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, in order that he might be the firstborn among many brothers.”
 - Paul describes this as Christ formed in us in Galatians 4:19, “my little children, for whom I am again in the anguish of childbirth until Christ is formed in you!”
- It is a work of God by the Holy Spirit and the Word (Bible)
 - 1 Peter 5:10, “the God of all grace, who has called you to his eternal glory in Christ, will himself restore, confirm, strengthen, and establish you.”

²⁶ Chad Van Dixhoorn, *Confessing the Faith* (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth, 2014), 178.

- Hebrews 10:14, “For by a single offering he has perfected for all time those who are being sanctified.”
- Philippians 1:6, “I am confident of this, that the one who began a good work in you will continue to complete it until the day of Jesus Christ.”
- Killing sin in us and purifying us from it and its influence.
 - Titus 2:14, “He it is who gave himself for us that he might redeem us from all iniquity and purify for himself a people of his own who are zealous for good deeds.”
 - Romans 8:13, “For if you live according to the flesh you will die, but if by the Spirit you put to death the deeds of the body, you will live.”
 - Sanctification is synergistic through the Spirit.
 - It is spiritually powered.
 - Our evil desires are weakened and put to death.
- He is enabling us to glorify him and enjoy him.
 - Hebrews 1:20–21, “Now may the God of peace who brought again from the dead our Lord Jesus, the great shepherd of the sheep, by the blood of the eternal covenant, equip you with everything good that you may do his will, working in us that which is pleasing in his sight, through Jesus Christ, to whom be glory forever and ever. Amen.”
 - God is preparing us for heaven and eternity in his presence.
 - He is enabling us to fully enjoy him.
- Sanctification is never completed in this life, so we still fight against sin. Romans 7:18, “For I know that nothing good dwells in me, that is, in my flesh. For I have the desire to do what is right, but not the ability to carry it out.”

Glorified

- When the Christian dies, their spirit is instantly with the Lord.
 - They are made holy in that instant and ready to enter into God’s presence.
 - Romans 8:30, “And those whom he predestined he also called, and those whom he called he also justified, and those whom he justified he also glorified.”
- In Jesus’ presence, we will be made even more like Him. 1 John 3:2–3, “Beloved, we are God’s children now; what we will be has not yet been revealed. What we do know is this: when he is revealed, we will be like him, for we will see him as he is. And all who have this hope in him purify themselves, just as he is pure.”

- When Christ returns, our dead body will be reunited with our spirit.
 - The bodies will be perfected – “raised to honor and will be made like Christ’s own glorious body.”²⁷
 - Philippians 3:20–21, “our citizenship is in heaven, and from it we await a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ, who will transform our lowly body to be like his glorious body, by the power that enables him even to subject all things to himself.”
- And we will dwell the Lord forever in a new creation – a new heaven and earth.
 - Revelation 21:1–4, “Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more. And I saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, “Behold, the dwelling place of God is with man. He will dwell with them, and they will be his people, and God himself will be with them as their God. He will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning, nor crying, nor pain anymore, for the former things have passed away.”

Application -

- Identity: Christians are those who are like Christ and are being made more like Christ and one day will be a lot like Christ.
 - The Holy Spirit is working in Christians to enable them to better glorify God and enjoy Him forever.
 - Growing into our identity.
 - There is a disconnect between who we are in Christ and how we live.
 - Powlison writes, “A true and enduring identity is a complex gift of Christ’s grace. He gives a new identity in an act of mercy. Then his Spirit makes it a living reality over a lifetime. When you see him face to face, you will know him as he truly is, and you will fully know who you are.”²⁸
- God is working in us that which is pleasing to Him in and through Jesus Christ.

²⁷ James Renihan, *1689 Baptist Confession of Faith & the Baptist Catechism* (Birmingham, AL: Solid Ground Christian Books, 2018), 31.3.

²⁸ Powlison, “A Man’s Identity,” 79.

- Hebrews 13:20-21, “Now may the God of peace who brought again from the dead our Lord Jesus, the great shepherd of the sheep, by the blood of the eternal covenant, 21 equip you with everything good that you may do his will, working in us that which is pleasing in his sight, through Jesus Christ, to whom be glory forever and ever. Amen.”

For Reflection:

- Key verse: 1 Corinthians 1:2, “To the church of God that is in Corinth, to those sanctified in Christ Jesus, called to be saints together with all those who in every place call upon the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, both their Lord and ours.”

- How does this reality address feelings of not measuring up to standards set by yourself or others?

- How do you abide in the truth that you are sanctified and glorified in Christ?

- Ask: What do I think? What do I feel? What do I know?

Lesson 8

John 17:22–23, 1 John 4:9–12

Loved and Cared for in Him

Main Point:

Through union with Christ, Christians are loved by God with the same unchanging love the Father has for the Son.

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 - Lesson 3 –
 - Abiding in Christ
 - Believers are to abide in union with Christ by living out of that union and treasuring it above all else.
 - Lesson 4
 - New Creation
 - The believer is a new person through his union with Christ.
 - Lesson 5
 - Made Righteous

- Union with Christ means that the righteousness of Christ belongs to the believer so that God the Father sees the believer as righteous, just as Jesus is righteous.
 - Lessons 6
 - Adopted
 - Union with Christ means that the believer is now a child of God.
 - Lesson 7
 - Sanctified and Glorified
 - In union with Christ, believers are sanctified, being sanctified, and one day will be glorified.
- Have you ever known love? Loving and being loved is one of the greatest feelings we can experience in this life.
- Those who are “in Christ” are loved by God.
 - Christians are loved with the very same love the Father has had for the Son for all eternity.
 - Christians are brought into the inter-Trinitarian love.
 - Jesus’ high priestly prayer in John 17:22–23, “The glory that you have given me I have given to them, that they may be one even as we are one, I in them and you in me, that they may become perfectly one, so that the world may know that you sent me and loved them even as you loved me.”
 - God brings us into this overabundance of love.
- How can we know that God loves us?
 - Jesus is the one who shows us the love of God.
 - 1 John 4:9–12, “In this the love of God was made manifest among us, that God sent his only Son into the world, so that we might live through him. In this is love, not that we have loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the atoning sacrifice for our sins. Beloved, if God so loved us, we also ought to love one another. No one has ever seen God; if we love one another, God abides in us and his love is perfected in us.”

We see Love Demonstrated in Jesus’ Life and Death

- God’s love for us is shown in sending Jesus, His only Son, “so that we might live through him.” (1 John 4:9)
 - We were spiritually dead.
 - God sent Jesus to give us life.

- This new life required the death of Jesus (1 John 4:10)
 - John 3:16, “For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life.”
 - Ephesians 5.25 “Husbands, love your wives, as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her.”
- This is the greatest love imaginable.
 - John 15:9, 12-14, “As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you. Abide in my love...This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. Greater love has no one than this, that someone lay down his life for his friends. You are my friends if you do what I command you.”
 - Marriage exists to point to our union with Christ.
 - Ephesians 5:25–32, “Husbands, love your wives, as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her, that he might sanctify her, having cleansed her by the washing of water with the word, so that he might present the church to himself in splendor, without spot or wrinkle or any such thing, that she might be holy and without blemish. In the same way husbands should love their wives as their own bodies. He who loves his wife loves himself. For no one ever hated his own flesh, but nourishes and cherishes it, just as Christ does the church, because we are members of his body. “Therefore a man shall leave his father and mother and hold fast to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh.” This mystery is profound, and I am saying that it refers to Christ and the church.”
 - David Powlison writes, “You learn how to husband a wife in love by being well-husbanded by Christ.”²⁹
- It was not because of our deserving this love. Romans 5:7-8, “For one will scarcely die for a righteous person—though perhaps for a good person one would dare even to die—but God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us.”

This love is Unconditional

- All human love is conditional and changing.

²⁹ Powlison, 81.

- God’s love of the Christian is not based on us but on the Father’s love for the Son. God is unchanging.
- Romans 8:35–39, “Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or danger, or sword? ... No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am sure that neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come, nor powers, nor height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.”
 - No created thing can separate the Christian from God’s love.
 - Not Satan or demons, not death, not even ourselves and the things we do.

Other Blessings Related to Union with Christ

- Provision
 - Philippians 4:19, “And my God will supply every need of yours according to his riches in glory in Christ Jesus.”
 - Romans 8:32, “He who did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all, how will he not also with him graciously give us all things?”
- Peace
 - Philippians 4:7, “And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.”
 - John 16:33, “I have said these things to you, that in me you may have peace. In the world you will have tribulation. But take heart; I have overcome the world.”
- Strength
 - Powlison says, “The Lord is our refuge. Our lives are beset by a variety of troubles, threats, and disappointments. We aren’t strong enough to stand up to what we face. God’s presence is the only safe place. Faith knows and embraces this core identity: ‘I am a refugee.’”³⁰
 - Philippians 4:13, “I can do all things through him who strengthens me.”
 - 2 Timothy 2:1, “You then, my child, be strengthened by the grace that is in Christ Jesus.”

³⁰ Powlison, 80.

- Ephesians 6:10, “Finally, be strong in the Lord and in the strength of his might.”
- Rom. 8:37, “No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us.”
- 1 Corinthians 15:57, “But thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.”
- Prayer
 - 1 John 5:14–15, “And this is the confidence that we have toward him, that if we ask anything according to his will he hears us. ¹⁵ And if we know that he hears us in whatever we ask, we know that we have the requests that we have asked of him.”
 - Ephesians 3:12, “in whom we have boldness and access with confidence through our faith in him.”
 - Romans 5:2, “Through him we have also obtained access by faith into this grace in which we stand, and we rejoice in hope of the glory of God.”
 - Ephesians 2:18, “For through him we both have access in one Spirit to the Father.”
- Rest - Matthew 11:28–30, “Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.”
- Abundant life - John 10:10, “The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I came that they may have life and have it abundantly.”

Application -

- We see the extent of the Father’s love in His willingness to offer His Son for our salvation. (John 3:16)
- We see the extent of the love of Jesus in His willingness to take our sin, suffering, and death for our salvation. (John 15:13)
- We are complete in Christ - Margy Tripp, “Because, we are complete in Christ... He is all we need. The list in Scripture of His provision for our needs is huge... Shepherd, Provider, Defender, Brother, Comforter, Strong Tower, Friend, Deliverer, (there are over 200 such references in Scripture).”³¹

³¹ Margy Tripp, interview with Chad Bennett, Hazleton, PA, June 8, 2022.

- Thankfulness - Colossians 3:17, “And whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him.”
- We should love one another.
 - “Beloved, if God so loved us, we also ought to love one another.” (1 John 4:11)
 - This is evidence that Christ is in us and that we are abiding in him.
 - “No one has ever seen God; if we love one another, God abides in us and his love is perfected in us.” (1 John 4:12)
 - Ephesians 5:2, “walk in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God.”
 - John 15:12, “This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you.”
- Identity: Through union with Christ, Christians are loved by God with the same unchanging love the Father has for the Son.
 - Christian, you are loved by God.
 - Christ in your heart. Ephesians 3:17–19, “so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith—that you, being rooted and grounded in love, may have strength to comprehend with all the saints what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, that you may be filled with all the fullness of God.”

For Reflection:

- Key verses: John 17:22–23, “The glory that you have given me I have given to them, that they may be one even as we are one, I in them and you in me, that they may become perfectly one, so that the world may know that you sent me and loved them even as you loved me.”
- What are some ways you have felt unloved, neglected, or abandoned in your life?

- How does God's love and care for you through your union with Christ address these feelings?

- Ask: What do I think? What do I feel? What do I know?

- How do you abide in union with Christ in relation to God's love and care for you?

APPENDIX 4

ADDITIONAL LESSON HANDOUTS

The following handouts reflect what was distributed to participants for the two lessons added upon completion of the project. These lessons follow the basic structure utilized for the eight weeks of the project.

Lesson 9

Romans 6:1–11; Colossians 2:6–15; 1 Corinthians 10:16–17, 21

The Ordinances and Union

Main Point:

Our union with Christ is set forth in the ordinances of baptism and the Lord's supper, which God has given his Church.

Introduction -

- Review:
 - New creation in Christ.
 - Righteous in Christ.
 - A child of God in Christ.
 - Sanctified and glorified in Christ
 - Loved and cared for in Christ
- Our union with Christ is set forth in the ordinances of baptism and the Lord's supper, which God has given his Church.
 - Together, they identify those who have participated in Jesus' life, death, and resurrection.
 - Baptism – proclaims entrance into union with Christ.
 - The Lord's Supper – proclaims the believer's ongoing participation in that union.
 - Paul D. Hamilton observes that the ordinances “are important parts of the life of the church, experienced and witnessed together as a church. Rightly used, these two ordinances can build up and encourage the church's corporate sense of being united with Christ together.”³²

³² Paul D. Hamilton, “The Christian's Identity in Christ: A Framework for Pastoral Ministry” (Master's Thesis, Charlotte, NC, Reformed Theological Seminary, 2014), 94.

Union with Christ – Romans 6:1–11

- Baptism gets its meaning from Jesus’ death and resurrection.
- Marcus Peter Johnson writes, “In the waters of baptism, God impresses upon our bodies the truth and reality of our incorporation into the death, burial and resurrection of the living Christ. Baptism, in other words, is a visible and tangible experience of the exceedingly good news (gospel) that we have been crucified in Christ’s death and raised to new life in Christ’s resurrection. Baptism is the sacrament (“mystery”) of our new crucified and resurrected identity in Christ Jesus.”³³
- “With him” or into him” language in Romans 6:1–11:
 - Verse 3 - baptized into Christ Jesus, baptized into His death
 - Verse 4 - buried with Him
 - Verse 5 - we have become united with Him
 - Verse 6 - crucified with Him
 - Verse 8 - died with Christ, live with Him
 - Verse 11 - alive to God in Christ Jesus
- Your old self has died, and your identity is now found in Christ.
 - Galatians 3:26–29, “in Christ Jesus you are all sons of God, through faith. For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is no male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus. And if you are Christ's, then you are Abraham's offspring, heirs according to promise.”
 - Our Confession says the following regarding baptism: “Baptism is an ordinance of the New Testament, ordained by Jesus Christ, to be unto the party baptized, a sign of his fellowship with him, in his death and resurrection; of his being engrafted into him; of remission of sins; and of giving up into God, through Jesus Christ, to live and walk in newness of life.”³⁴
- Corporate unity - 1 Corinthians 12:12–13, “For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body,

³³ Marcus Peter Johnson, “10 Things You Should Know about Union with Christ,” Crossway, August 23, 2016, <https://www.crossway.org/articles/10-things-you-should-know-about-union-with-christ/>.

³⁴ Renihan, *1689 Baptist Confession of Faith & the Baptist Catechism*, 29.1.

so it is with Christ. For in one Spirit we were all baptized into one body— Jews or Greeks, slaves or free—and all were made to drink of one Spirit.”

- Newness of Life in Him (resurrection)
 - Christ did not come, suffer, and die to improve the old self. He came to bring death to the old self and raise us to newness of life in Him.
 - You are no longer a slave to sin (Rom 6:6–7)
 - You have been freed from the dominion of the tyrant sin.
 - We do not just have freedom from a tyrant, the tyrant has been put to death.
 - You have died to sin (Rom 6:1–2)
 - Not just a separating from it, but a dying to it
 - Same truth in 1 Peter 2:24, “He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree, so that we might die to sins and live for righteousness; by his wounds you have been healed.”
 - This does not mean that you will live a perfect life without ever sinning.
 - The cross broke sin’s power over us - we are no longer enslaved to it to obey its desires as our master.
 - The thought of our continuing to live in sin is beyond comprehension to Paul (Rom 6:1-2).
 - You have a new Lord – “In the same way, count yourselves dead to sin but alive to God in Christ Jesus.” (Rom 6:11)
 - You are now to live for God.
 - Paul’s first prayer after he was saved: “Lord, what do you want me to do?” (Acts 22:10)
 - Do everything in your life for His glory – “So whether you eat or drink or whatever you do, do it all for the glory of God.” (1 Cor 10:31)
 - You are now, for the first time, alive.
 - 2 Corinthians 5:17, “Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come!”

The Blessings Symbolized in Baptism - Colossians 2:6-15

- You have been filled in Him (Col 2:10)

- This speaks to our union with Christ and also the indwelling of the Spirit.
- The fullness of deity dwells in Him (Col 2:9) and we have been filled with Him.
- He is the head of all rule and authority (Col 2:10b).
- You have received a circumcised heart (Col 2:11)
 - Deuteronomy 10:12–13, 16, “And now, Israel, what does the Lord your God require of you, but to fear the Lord your God, to walk in all his ways, to love him, to serve the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul, and to keep the commandments and statutes of the Lord, which I am commanding you today for your good? . . . Circumcise therefore the foreskin of your heart, and be no longer stubborn.”
 - This is experiencing the New Covenant promises of Jeremiah 31:33, “For this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, declares the Lord: I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts. And I will be their God, and they shall be my people.”
 - Baptism celebrates God having done this for the believer.
- You have died with Him and been raised with Him (Col 2:12)
 - Your old self has died and your identity is now to be found in Christ.
 - Baptism symbolizes not only Christ’s death and resurrection but our death to sin and new life in Him.
 - “He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree, so that we might die to sins and live for righteousness; by his wounds you have been healed” (1 Peter 2:24)
 - Baptism represents a radical change of being made a new creation.
 - 2 Corinthians 5:17, “Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come!”
- Your sins have been forgiven (Col 2:13)
 - The record of our sins were nailed to the cross.
 - Again, Jeremiah 31:34, "For I will forgive their iniquity, and I will remember their sin no more.”
 - Isaiah 1:18, “Come now, let us reason together, says the Lord: though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; though they are red like crimson, they shall become like wool.”

- We have been washed in the blood of the lamb.
 - Matthew 26:28, "For this is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins."
 - Ephesians 1:7, "In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of his grace,"

The Lord's Supper

- Participation and Communion
 - 1 Corinthians 10:16–17, 21, “The cup of blessing that we bless, is it not a participation in the blood of Christ? The bread that we break, is it not a participation in the body of Christ? Because there is one bread, we who are many are one body, for we all partake of the one bread... You cannot drink the cup of the Lord and the cup of demons. You cannot partake of the table of the Lord and the table of demons.”
 - The cup and the bread are a participation in Christ.
 - The word in Greek is *koinonia*, meaning: participation, communion, and fellowship.
 - Our confession states that the Lord's Supper is “to be a bond and pledge of their communion with him, and with each other.”³⁵
- Eating Christ
 - Matthew 26:26–29, “Now as they were eating, Jesus took bread, and after blessing it broke it and gave it to the disciples, and said, “Take, eat; this is my body.” And he took a cup, and when he had given thanks he gave it to them, saying, “Drink of it, all of you, for this is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins. I tell you I will not drink again of this fruit of the vine until that day when I drink it new with you in my Father's kingdom.”
 - 1 Corinthians 11:23–26, “For I received from the Lord what I also delivered to you, that the Lord Jesus on the night when he was betrayed took bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it, and said, “This is my body, which is for you. Do this in remembrance of me.” In the same way also he took the cup, after supper, saying, “This

³⁵ Renihan, 30.1.

cup is the new covenant in my blood. Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me.” For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes.”

- John 6:53–58, “So Jesus said to them, “Truly, truly, I say to you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you. Whoever feeds on my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life, and I will raise him up on the last day. For my flesh is true food, and my blood is true drink. Whoever feeds on my flesh and drinks my blood abides in me, and I in him. As the living Father sent me, and I live because of the Father, so whoever feeds on me, he also will live because of me. This is the bread that came down from heaven, not like the bread the fathers ate, and died. Whoever feeds on this bread will live forever.”
 - Abiding in verse 56 is John’s word for Union with Christ.
 - The Lord’s supper is a continual means of abiding in Christ.
- Joel Beeke and Paul Smalley note, “Christ drew upon this rich Old Testament background when He compared union and communion with Him to eating and drinking. Christ alone gives the living water that eternally satisfies (John 4:14), the heavenly streams of the Holy Spirit (John 7:37–39). Jesus Himself is the Bread of Life whom we eat by faith (John 6:35). With respect to eating this bread, Jesus shockingly said that we must eat His flesh and blood to have eternal life (John 6:48–58), a reference to the sacrifice of His humanity upon the cross. Eating Christ is a metaphor for entering into a deep union with Christ by faith so that the incarnate Mediator becomes your life.”³⁶

Union with Christ

- The Lord’s Supper is a reminder of our need of union with Christ. Paul Hamilton says, “the Lord’s Supper dramatizes the believer’s real need to constantly be vitally connected to Christ. As food and drink preserve life in the human body, so spiritually the Christian is totally dependent on Christ to live.”³⁷
- It recounts the “good news” of ongoing participation. Marcus Peter Johnson writes, “In the bread and wine of the Lord’s Supper, God impresses in our

³⁶ Joel R. Beeke and Paul M. Smalley, “Images of Union and Communion with Christ,” *Puritan Reformed Journal* 8, no. 2 (2016): 131.

³⁷ Hamilton, “The Christian’s Identity in Christ: A Framework for Pastoral Ministry,” 94.

bodies the truth and reality of our ongoing participation in the living Savior. The Lord's Supper, in other words, is a visible and edible experience of the exceedingly good news (gospel) that Christ dwells in us and that we dwell in him. Christ brought us into the eternal life that he is by giving us himself, and he continues to nourish and sustain us through his real presence.

We *have* really and truly become one with Christ through his gospel, and we *continue* to receive Christ through the gospel of bread and wine that he has ordained as means of his ongoing presence to his body and bride.”³⁸

- The New Covenant - Adam Sinnett observes, “what is being remembered in the Lord's Supper are the new covenant realities that Jesus achieved that we now participate in, by faith. As we have seen, the essence of the new covenant is a personal and profound relationship with God, *in Christ*. Therefore, when we celebrate the Lord's Supper, taking in the bread and wine, we are demonstrating our participating in this living, profound, covenantal relationship.”³⁹

For Reflection:

- Key verses: Romans 6:3–5, “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. ⁵ 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.”
- What does baptism teach you about your identity in Christ?
- What does the lord's supper teach you about your identity in Christ?

³⁸ Johnson, “10 Things You Should Know about Union with Christ.”

³⁹ Sinnett, “A Theology of Union: What It Means to Belong to God, In Christ, and Its Application,” 94. Emphasis original.

- What do the ordinances teach you about your corporate identity?

- Ask: What do I think? What do I feel? What do I know?

- How do the ordinances of baptism and the Lord's supper help you abide in union with Christ?

Lesson 10

Romans 12:4-5

The Church – His Body

Main Point:

Through union with Christ, Christians are corporately united to Christ and each other.

Introduction -

- Review:
 - New creation in Christ.
 - Righteous in Christ.
 - A child of God in Christ.
 - Sanctified and glorified in Christ
 - Loved and cared for in Christ
 - Baptism and the Lord's Supper
- The believer's corporate identity:
 - Through union with Christ, Christians are corporately united to Christ and each other.
 - The believer's union with Christ necessarily unites him with all those who are united to Christ.
 - The church is essential to the believer's understanding of his identity.
- This lesson will consider various expressions of the church's union with Christ

The Church Abiding in Christ

- The Church (individually and corporately) is brought into the mutual indwelling of the Trinity (*Perichoresis*).
- John 17:22–23, “The glory that you have given me I have given to them, that they may be one even as we are one,²³ I in them and you in me, that they may become perfectly one, so that the world may know that you sent me and loved them even as you loved me.”

- John 14:20, “In that day you will know that I am in my Father, and you in me, and I in you.”
- 1 John 4:13–16, “By this we know that we abide in him and he in us, because he has given us of his Spirit. ¹⁴ And we have seen and testify that the Father has sent his Son to be the Savior of the world. ¹⁵ Whoever confesses that Jesus is the Son of God, God abides in him, and he in God. ¹⁶ So we have come to know and to believe the love that God has for us. God is love, and whoever abides in love abides in God, and God abides in him.”

Living Temple

- Believers are made into a living temple in Christ.
- 1 Peter 2:4–7, “As you come to him, a living stone rejected by men but in the sight of God chosen and precious, you yourselves like living stones are being built up as a spiritual house, to be a holy priesthood, to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ. For it stands in Scripture: ‘Behold, I am laying in Zion a stone, a cornerstone chosen and precious, and whoever believes in him will not be put to shame.’ So the honor is for you who believe, but for those who do not believe, ‘The stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone.’” (cf. Ps 118:22, Matt 21:42)
 - His Church is living because they are united to the living Christ.
 - The Church is being built into a spiritual house (temple) where God is worshipped through Christ.
 - Christ is the cornerstone that unites these blocks and makes them into a complete temple.
- 1 Corinthians 3:16–17, “Do you not know that you are God's temple and that God's Spirit dwells in you? If anyone destroys God's temple, God will destroy him. For God's temple is holy, and you are that temple.”
 - The Holy Spirit is the deity that indwells this holy temple.
 - It is God’s presence that makes a temple a temple.
- Ephesians 2:19–22, “So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God, built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus himself being the cornerstone, in whom the whole structure, being joined together, grows into a holy temple in the Lord. In him you also are being built together into a dwelling place for God by the Spirit.”
 - Paul uses almost the same words as Peter in 1 Peter 2:5.

- 1 Corinthians 6:19–20, “Or do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you, whom you have from God? You are not your own, for you were bought with a price. So glorify God in your body.”
- 2 Corinthians 6:16, “What agreement has the temple of God with idols? For we are the temple of the living God.”

Body of Christ

- Believers are vitally united to each other and their head, Christ.
- Peterson writes, “the very concept of the body of Christ speaks of incorporation into him.”⁴⁰
- New Testament passages on the Church as the body of Christ.
 - Rom. 12:4-5, “For as in one body we have many members, and the members do not all have the same function,⁵ so we, though many, are one body in Christ, and individually members one of another.”
 - Col. 2:19, “and not holding fast to the Head, from whom the whole body, nourished and knit together through its joints and ligaments, grows with a growth that is from God.”
 - Ephesians 4:4-5, 16, “There is one body and one Spirit—just as you were called to the one hope that belongs to your call—⁵ one Lord, one faith, one baptism,⁶ one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all...from whom the whole body, joined and held together by every joint with which it is equipped, when each part is working properly, makes the body grow so that it builds itself up in love.”
 - Ephesians 5:23, 29-30, “For the husband is the head of the wife even as Christ is the head of the church, his body, and is himself its Savior... For no one ever hated his own flesh, but nourishes and cherishes it, just as Christ does the church,³⁰ because we are members of his body.”
 - 1 Cor. 12:12-13, 27, “For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ.¹³ For in one Spirit we were all baptized into one body—Jews or Greeks, slaves or free—and all were made to drink of one Spirit...Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it.”

⁴⁰ Robert A. Peterson, *Salvation Applied by the Spirit: Union with Christ* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2014), 388.

- Eph. 1:22-23, “And he put all things under his feet and gave him as head over all things to the church, ²³ which is his body, the fullness of him who fills all in all.”
- Col. 1:18, “And he is the head of the body, the church. He is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, that in everything he might be preeminent.”
- 1 Cor. 6:15, “Do you not know that your bodies are members of Christ?”

Bride of Christ

- The Old Testament regularly speaks of God as a husband to His people.
- 1. The New Testament gives a greater expression of this through union with Christ.
- Constantine R. Campbell writes, “The metaphor is personal and implies a bond of intimacy that goes well beyond the other metaphors which Paul uses in portraying union with Christ.”⁴¹
- Ephesians 5:31–32, “Therefore a man shall leave his father and mother and hold fast to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh.” ³² This mystery is profound, and I am saying that it refers to Christ and the church.”
- 1 Corinthians 6:15–17, “Do you not know that your bodies are members of Christ? Shall I then take the members of Christ and make them members of a prostitute? Never! Or do you not know that he who is joined to a prostitute becomes one body with her? For, as it is written, “The two will become one flesh.” But he who is joined to the Lord becomes one spirit with him.”
- 2 Corinthians 11:2, “For I feel a divine jealousy for you, since I betrothed you to one husband, to present you as a pure virgin to Christ.”
- Revelation 19:6–9, “Then I heard what seemed to be the voice of a great multitude, like the roar of many waters and like the sound of mighty peals of thunder, crying out, ‘Hallelujah! For the Lord our God the Almighty reigns. Let us rejoice and exult and give him the glory, for the marriage of the Lamb has come, and his Bride has made herself ready; it was granted her to clothe herself with fine linen, bright and pure’— for the fine linen is the righteous deeds of the saints. And the angel said to me, ‘Write this: Blessed are those who are invited to the marriage supper of the Lamb.’” And he said to me, ‘These are the true words of God.’”

⁴¹ Campbell, *Paul and Union with Christ: An Exegetical and Theological Study*, 308.

- Revelation 21:2–3, “And I saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, ‘Behold, the dwelling place of God is with man. He will dwell with them, and they will be his people, and God himself will be with them as their God.’”
- Robert A. Peterson says, “God joins individuals to his Son to constitute the church. Union with Christ necessarily means union with others joined to Christ. In addition, Paul shocks us by taking a bigger view yet: God plans to “unite all things in” Christ, ‘things in heaven and things on earth’ (Eph. 1:10). Paul thus construes union with Christ and salvation in individual, corporate, and cosmic terms.”⁴²

Application -

- Corporate identity:
 - Christians are a part of Christ’s body and belong to His Church.
 - This corporate identity shapes the Christian’s understanding of his identity.
 - The believer belongs to a community created by God and united to each other through their union with Christ.
 - a. Powlison observes that, “Your new and true identity connects you to God’s other children in a common calling. It is not individualistic. You are one member in the living body of Christ.”⁴³
 - b. Peterson writes, “the Holy Spirit is God’s bond of vital union with Christ and other believers. When Christ incorporates us into his body through the spirit, he joins us to every other member of his body as well. Union with Christ is vertical and horizontal, corporate and individual.”⁴⁴

For Reflection:

⁴² Peterson, *Salvation Applied by the Spirit*, 384.

⁴³ Powlison, “A Man’s Identity,” 79.

⁴⁴ Peterson, *Salvation Applied by the Spirit*, 388.

- Key verse: Romans 12:5, “so we, though many, are one body in Christ, and individually members one of another.”
- How has being a part of the Church shaped your identity?
- What does it mean for Christ to be the head of the body?
- What does it mean for Christians to be a part of that body?
- How should you relate to other Christians in light of your corporate union with Christ?
- What are some dangers of not attending and/or actively participating in a local church? What impact might a virtual or remote church have on a Christian?
- Ask: What do I think? What do I feel? What do I know?
- How do you abide in union with Christ as a part of His Church?

APPENDIX 5
THINK-FEEL-KNOW HANDOUT

The following handout is based off a sermon I heard from pastor Joel Beeke.¹ It was distributed to participants with lesson 4. The handout was discussed and the class together worked through a few examples. The handout was then referenced in subsequent lessons in the “For Reflection” section and during times of discussion.

¹ Joel R. Beeke, "How Am I Justified before God?" (sermon delivered at Trinity Bible Church, Powell, WY, 2017).

Think – Feel – Know Method

In 2017, I heard Joel Beeke give a method of working through one's thought patterns and preaching the gospel to oneself.² It involves asking what you think about a situation, what you feel about it, and what you know from God's Word to be true.

For example:

- What do I think? I think I am going to lose my job.
- How do I feel? I feel scared and insecure.
- What do I know? I know "if God so clothes the grass of the field, which today is alive and tomorrow is thrown into the oven, will he not much more clothe you, O you of little faith? Therefore do not be anxious, saying, 'What shall we eat?' or 'What shall we drink?' or 'What shall we wear?' For the Gentiles seek after all these things, and your heavenly Father knows that you need them all. But seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be added to you." (Mt. 6:30-33)

As you go through the following chapters work through this set of questions. Use what you know to be true from the Lesson and the Bible to address your fears and struggles.

² Beeke, "How Am I Justified before God?"

APPENDIX 6

UCIS RESULTS

The UCIS was designed to assist in lesson development and to evaluate effectiveness of the project. The survey had twenty-eight items that were based on a 6-point Likert scale. The following data is included in this appendix: (1) Pre-study results for participants who completed the study, (2) Post-study results for participants who completed the study, (3) Summarized results per participant, (4) Summarized results per item, (5) UCIS item categories, (6) Spiritual life category results, (7) Union with Christ category results, (8) Christian identity category results, (9) Pre-study results for participants who did not complete the study and whose results were only used for goals one and two of the project, (10) Summarized Pre-study results for all participants including those who did not complete the study.

Table A1. Pre-study results for participants who completed the study

Item	3010	0309	0908	4131	1313	4656	6819	7777	0216	2911	6282	0047	Total*	Mean
6	3	4	4	4	2	4	4	5	1	4	6	6	47	3.92
7	6	5	4	2	5	4	4	4	5	4	6	6	55	4.58
8	4	4	5	2	5	4	3	4	4	4	6	6	51	4.25
9	6	3	4	2	1	5	3	5	5	3	3	2	42	3.50
10	5	1	3	2	1	3	3	3	3	4	2	2	32	2.67
11	5	2	5	1	1	3	5	5	5	5	5	5	47	3.92
12	6	4	5	5	5	4	5	4	4	4	6	6	58	4.83
13	4	3	5	4	3	4	4	5	4	4	4	6	50	4.17
14	6	3	5	2	2	4	5	5	4	5	4	6	51	4.25
15	6	5	5	4	5	6	5	6	6	4	6	6	64	5.33
16	3	2	4	1	3	4	3	4	2	5	2	4	37	3.08
17	4	4	5	4	2	4	3	5	4	3	5	6	49	4.08
18	5	4	6	2	3	3	4	5	6	5	5	6	54	4.50
19	6	3	6	1	5	5	6	6	5	5	5	4	57	4.75
20	5	3	5	5	5	4	4	5	4	5	5	6	56	4.67
21	6	4	5	2	3	3	4	5	3	5	5	6	51	4.25
22	3	4	4	2	2	5	4	5	5	4	2	6	46	3.83
23	3	3	3	4	5	4	4	5	5	4	6	5	51	4.25
24	2	1	3	1	3	3	2	4	2	3	2	2	28	2.33
25	3	2	4	3	3	3	3	5	2	4	2	2	36	3.00
26	5	4	5	3	3	3	3	4	5	3	3	1	42	3.50
27	5	2	3	2	4	4	2	4	2	5	2	2	37	3.08
28	5	5	5	3	4	3	4	5	5	4	5	5	53	4.42
29	6	6	5	6	5	4	5	5	5	5	6	6	64	5.33
30	5	3	5	1	5	3	3	3	1	3	2	3	37	3.08
31	5	5	5	5	3	5	4	4	5	4	6	6	57	4.75
32	5	1	5	1	3	5	2	5	2	3	2	2	36	3.00
33	5	2	6	2	5	3	4	4	2	3	3	1	40	3.33
Total**	132	92	129	76	96	109	105	129	106	114	116	124		
Mean	4.71	3.29	4.61	2.71	3.43	3.89	3.75	4.61	3.79	4.07	4.14	4.43		

Note: * Out of 72 (6 possible points per items X 12 people surveyed = 12 possible points per item)

** Out of 168 (6 possible points per items X 28 items = 168 possible points per person)

Table A2. Post-study results for participants who completed the study

Item	3010	0309	0908	4131	1313	4656	6819	7777	0216	2911	6282	0047	Total*	Mean
6	4	4	4	5	3	4	4	5	6	5	6	5	55	4.58
7	4	4	5	4	5	4	5	5	5	5	6	6	58	4.83
8	4	3	6	4	5	5	5	5	5	5	6	6	59	4.92
9	6	3	5	3	3	4	4	5	5	3	3	3	47	3.92
10	5	1	5	3	3	3	4	5	5	3	4	2	43	3.58
11	5	2	5	4	4	5	6	6	5	4	3	3	52	4.33
12	6	4	6	5	5	4	5	5	1	5	5	5	56	4.67
13	5	5	6	5	4	4	5	5	5	3	5	5	57	4.75
14	6	4	6	6	5	4	6	5	6	5	6	6	65	5.42
15	6	5	6	4	6	5	5	6	5	5	6	6	65	5.42
16	3	2	4	3	3	4	4	4	5	5	4	3	44	3.67
17	5	5	6	4	3	4	4	5	5	4	5	6	56	4.67
18	5	4	5	4	4	3	4	5	5	5	4	6	54	4.50
19	6	3	6	5	5	4	6	6	5	5	6	4	61	5.08
20	6	3	6	4	5	4	5	5	5	5	5	5	58	4.83
21	6	5	6	3	3	3	5	4	5	5	6	5	56	4.67
22	5	4	6	5	5	4	5	5	5	5	6	6	61	5.08
23	5	5	5	3	5	3	5	5	4	4	6	4	54	4.50
24	3	2	5	2	5	4	3	4	1	3	1	1	34	2.83
25	5	4	5	3	5	4	4	5	1	5	1	2	44	3.67
26	5	5	5	4	5	3	3	5	1	5	2	1	44	3.67
27	6	4	2	3	3	3	3	4	2	4	2	1	37	3.08
28	6	4	5	4	4	5	5	5	6	5	6	5	60	5.00
29	6	6	6	6	5	5	5	5	6	5	6	6	67	5.58
30	3	3	6	2	5	4	4	5	1	4	2	2	41	3.42
31	5	6	5	6	3	4	4	4	6	3	6	6	58	4.83
32	5	1	5	2	5	4	3	6	1	5	2	1	40	3.33
33	6	2	6	4	6	3	5	6	1	5	2	1	47	3.92
Total**	142	103	148	110	122	110	126	140	113	125	122	112		
Mean	5.07	3.68	5.29	3.93	4.36	3.93	4.50	5.00	4.04	4.46	4.36	4.00		

Note: * Out of 72 (6 possible points per items X 12 people surveyed = 72 possible points per item)

** Out of 168 (6 possible points per items X 28 items = 168 possible points per person)

Table A3. Summarized results per participant

Participant	UCIS 1	UCIS 2	Difference
3010	132	142	10
0309	92	103	11
0908	129	148	19
4131	76	110	34
1313	96	122	26
4656	109	110	1
6819	105	126	21
7777	129	140	11
0216	106	113	7
2911	114	125	11
6282	116	122	6
0047	124	112	-12
Mean	110.67	122.75	

Note: Out of 168 possible points per person

Table A4. Summarized results per item

	Q6	Q7	Q8	Q9	Q10	Q11	Q12	Q13	Q14	Q15	Q16	Q17	Q18	Q19
UCIS 1	47	55	51	42	32	47	58	50	51	64	37	49	54	57
UCIS 2	55	58	59	47	43	52	56	57	65	65	44	56	54	61
Difference	8	3	8	5	11	5	-2	7	14	1	7	7	0	4

	Q20	Q21	Q22	Q23	Q24	Q25	Q26	Q27	Q28	Q29	Q30	Q31	Q32	Q33
UCIS 1	56	51	46	51	28	36	42	37	53	64	37	57	36	40
UCIS 2	58	56	61	54	34	44	44	37	60	67	41	58	40	47
Difference	2	5	15	3	6	8	2	0	7	3	4	1	4	7

Note: Out of 72 possible points per item

Table A5. UCIS item categories

Union with Christ	Q6	Q7	Q8							Q15				
Christian Identity									Q14					Q19
Spiritual Life				Q9	Q10	Q11	Q12	Q13			Q16	Q17	Q18	

Union with Christ	Q20		Q22	Q23										
Christian Identity					Q24	Q25	Q26	Q27			Q30	Q31	Q32	Q33
Spiritual Life		Q21							Q28	Q29				

Table A6. Spiritual life category results

Item	UCIS 1	UCIS 2	Difference
9	42	47	5
10	32	43	11
11	47	52	5
12	58	56	-2
13	50	57	7
16	37	44	7
17	49	56	7
18	54	54	0
21	51	56	5
28	53	60	7
29	64	67	3
Mean	48.82	53.82	5

Note: Out of 72 possible points per item

Table A7. Union with Christ category results

Item	UCIS 1	UCIS 2	Difference
6	47	55	8
7	55	58	3
8	51	59	8
15	64	65	1
20	56	58	2
22	46	61	15
23	51	54	3
Mean	52.86	58.57	5.71

Note: Out of 72 possible points per item

Table A8. Christian identity category results

Item	UCIS 1	UCIS 2	Difference
14	51	65	14
19	57	61	4
24	28	34	6
25	36	44	8
26	42	44	2
27	37	37	0
30	37	41	4
31	57	58	1
32	36	40	4
33	40	47	7
Mean	42.1	47.1	5

Note: Out of 72 possible points per item

Table A9. Pre-study results for participants who did not complete the study

Item	1225	6453	0530	9017	5569	8675	7443	6978	2407	Total*	Mean
6	4	4	4	5	2	3	3	4	4	33	3.67
7	6	5	5	5	2	3	2	6	6	40	4.44
8	5	5	6	4	2	3	2	6	5	38	4.22
9	4	3	6	4	5	2	1	1	3	29	3.22
10	3	3	5	3	5	4	2	1	3	29	3.22
11	5	3	5	5	5	4	2	3	4	36	4.00
12	5	5	5	5	4	3	3	4	5	39	4.33
13	4	3	5	5	6	3	3	4	4	37	4.11
14	5	5	6	5	6	3	2	2	5	39	4.33
15	5	6	6	5	6	2	3	6	6	45	5.00
16	3	3	6	4	2	4	2	1	3	28	3.11
17	6	5	6	4	5	3	4	5	5	43	4.78
18	3	6	5	3	5	4	3	2	6	37	4.11
19	5	6	6	4	5	4	5	2	6	43	4.78
20	4	5	6	4	2	2	2	5	4	34	3.78
21	4	3	5	4	5	3	2	5	4	35	3.89
22	5	3	5	5	1	3	4	2	5	33	3.67
23	4	6	6	4	2	2	2	4	6	36	4.00
24	4	4	2	4	5	3	3	3	2	30	3.33
25	4	6	3	4	5	3	5	3	2	35	3.89
26	5	5	5	4	5	4	3	3	6	40	4.44
27	3	5	4	3	4	4	6	2	3	34	3.78
28	4	5	6	5	5	2	4	6	5	42	4.67
29	5	5	6	5	6	5	4	6	5	47	5.22
30	3	6	4	3	5	3	3	3	6	36	4.00
31	5	2	6	5	5	3	4	6	6	42	4.67
32	4	1	5	3	2	2	2	1	2	22	2.44
33	5	5	3	4	5	3	5	3	6	39	4.33
Total**	122	123	142	118	117	87	86	99	127		
Mean	4.36	4.39	5.07	4.21	4.18	3.11	3.07	3.54	4.54		

Note: Results were only used for goals one and two of the project

* Out of 54 (6 possible points per items X 9 people surveyed = 54 possible points per item)

** Out of 168 (6 possible points per items X 28 items = 168 possible points per person)

Table A10. Summarized Pre-study results for all participants

Item	Total	Mean
6	79	3.76
7	95	4.52
8	89	4.24
9	71	3.38
10	61	2.90
11	83	3.95
12	97	4.62
13	87	4.14
14	90	4.29
15	109	5.19
16	65	3.10
17	92	4.38
18	91	4.33
19	100	4.76
20	90	4.29
21	86	4.10
22	79	3.76
23	87	4.14
24	58	2.76
25	71	3.38
26	82	3.90
27	71	3.38
28	95	4.52
29	111	5.29
30	73	3.48
31	99	4.71
32	58	2.76
33	79	3.76

Note: Total is out of 126 possible points per item

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ABSTRACT

TEACHING THE SIGNIFICANCE OF THE BELIEVER'S UNION WITH CHRIST TO THE MEMBERS OF GRACE FELLOWSHIP CHURCH IN HAZLETON, PENNSYLVANIA

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The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, 2023
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This project seeks to teach the significance of the believer's union with Christ to the members of Grace Fellowship Church in Hazleton, Pennsylvania. Chapter 1 presents the ministry context of Grace Fellowship Church and the goals of this project. Chapter 2 provides exegesis of four passages of Scripture (Eph 2:1–21; Eph 1:3–10; Phil 3:1–11; John 15:1–11). The exegesis of these passages shows that union with Christ defines the believer's identity and is the source of all spiritual blessings for the believer. Chapter 3 details various methods of formulating one's identity how the doctrine of union with Christ can offer a corrective to these and help to shape a Christian identity in Christ. Chapter 4 explains the implementation of the project, recounting the content and teaching methodology of the specific course curriculum. Chapter 5 evaluates the efficacy of the project based on completion of the specified goals.

VITA

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EDUCATION

BA, Berry College, 2002

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MINISTERIAL EMPLOYMENT

Interim Pastor, Grace Chapel Reformed Baptist Church, Oneonta, Alabama,
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