



Introduction



It was the week our little team was being sent out from mother church to plant a new church focused on a particular part of the city. To that end, we were meeting with some more experienced church-planters to get their advice, and the first question was this: ‘What is the key thing a church-planter needs to know and teach a new church plant?’

I wonder how you would have answered that question. Maybe you would have said it was an understanding of the church: what the church is, what it’s for, how it functions. You might have said that a robust understanding of *ecclesiology* was the key to seeing a new church thrive. Maybe, on the other hand, you would have pointed to mission: if the church exists *for* mission and *through* mission, then surely helping those engaged in a new church-plant to



develop a strong *missiology* must be essential in helping that church live out its identity. Maybe you would have said that *pneumatology* was the key – learning to rely on and to follow the leading of the Spirit in everything; or even *eschatology* – helping the church to keep its eyes on the ultimate goal in all things: the establishment of a new heavens and a new earth at the appearing of Christ.

But here's the question: what would John Calvin, the great French Reformer, have said, if he'd been in the room? I suspect that, after first saying, 'Pardon, je ne comprends pas l'anglais' (and having asked for an interpreter), he would have said: 'That's simple: teach them about what it means to be united with Christ.' Here is what Calvin writes about union with Christ in his *Institutes*:

We see that our whole salvation and all its parts are comprehended in Christ ... This union (with Christ) alone ensures that, as far as we are concerned, he has not unprofitably come with the name of Saviour.¹

For Calvin, this was the doctrine from which all other doctrine – and all Christian living – flowed. John Owen regarded it with equal magnitude:

This is the cause of all other graces that we are made partakers of; they are all communicated unto us by virtue of our union with Christ. Hence is our adoption, our justification, our sanctification, our fruitfulness, our perseverance, our resurrection, our glory.²

1 John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 2.16.19 & 3.1.3.

2 John Owen, *An Exposition of the Epistle to the Hebrews*, 21:149-50 (as quoted in J. V. Fesko, *John Owen on Union with Christ and Justification*, http://thegospelcoalition.org/themelios/article/john_owen_on_union_with_christ_and_justification/#, footnote 24).

John Murray likewise called it ‘the central truth of the whole doctrine of salvation’.³

If these three ‘weighty’ theologians are right and the doctrine of union with Christ is the central tenet of the Christian faith – the spring from which all else flows – then everything we believe and do depends on the fact and nature of the relationship that exists between Jesus Christ and believers. A profound understanding of our union with Christ is critical for all church leadership and church-planting.

We sometimes hear the gospel being explained to children something like this: ‘When you believe in Jesus and trust him for your sins, Jesus lives in your heart.’ It is tempting to be critical of the simplicity of that explanation. It sounds a bit ‘twee’. Wise adults see theological truths missed out, and might feel sceptical about the summing up of salvation as ‘Jesus lives in your heart’. But the truth is that that simple line articulates something profound about the wonder and mystery of the gospel. Jesus *does* live in us. And we live in Him. It is a miracle of supernatural grace; a breathtaking condescension; an all-powerful love that unites us intimately with Christ Jesus. And because of that union, all of the riches of heaven are ours. John Calvin defined union with Christ as ‘the union by which we grow together with him so that he revives us by his Spirit and transfers his power to us.’⁴

Union with Christ is truly phenomenal and supernatural, but it is not make-believe or mysterious. It is beautifully pertinent to daily experience. As the central doctrine of the Christian faith it incorporates and expresses all that

3 John Murray, *Redemption Accomplished and Applied* (W. B. Eerdmans, 1955), p. 161.

4 John Calvin, *Commentaries*, Volume XXXVIII, Romans ch. 6, v. 5.

God has planned from eternity past, through time, and into eternity future.

The aim of this book is to show how our union with Christ really does shape and impact not only everything we do and say, but how we say and do it. It defines our theology in all of its aspects: soteriology, pneumatology, eschatology, missiology. But it also defines and shapes how we live.

It reverberates out into our pursuit of godliness. The more we understand the nature of who we are in Christ, the less we will sin. We sin because, in that moment, we forget who we are in Christ. We pretend to be something we are no longer. We are masquerading as ‘in Adam’, when the truth for Christians is that we are ‘in Christ’.

It reverberates in our shared life in community, because union with Christ necessarily involves union with all those who are also united with Christ. In His so-called ‘High Priestly prayer’, Jesus prays for unity among His people: ‘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...’ (John 17:22-23).

It reverberates in our witness to the world in mission because as we realise the utter futility of seeking to accomplish anything apart from Christ, we also know the security and joy of our identity in Him. Our union with Christ is the single best motivation for faithfulness and perseverance in proclaiming the gospel and in living for Christ before a watching world.